THE SFX HOLIDAY SPECIAL!

SFX

108 PAGES OF FESTIVE SCI-FI GOODNESS!

Star Wars: Skeleton Crew

Nosferatu

A Ghost Story For Christmas

Terrifier 3

The Box Of Delights

The Lord Of The Rings

Critters

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

DOCTOR WHO

Steven Moffat brings joy to the world

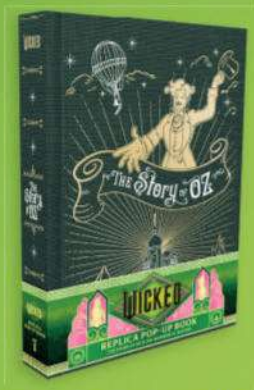
PLUS! CREATURE COMMANDOS | SONIC 3 | EARTH ABIDES | NEW GODS | RUMOURS
HAWK THE SLAYER | TVA | BATMAN | YOUR MONSTER | GAIL SIMONE | NIGHT RAVEN!

FUTURE

WICKED

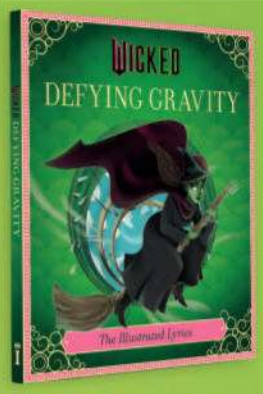
EVERYONE DESERVES THE CHANCE TO FLY

Don't miss these Oz-tastic books, perfect for Wicked fans of every age!



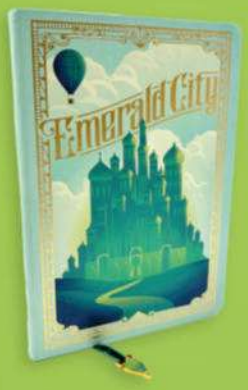
Wicked: Replica Pop-Up Book
£45.00

Wicked: The Grimmerie Collectible Hardcover Journal
£40.00



Wicked: Defying Gravity: The Illustrated Lyrics
£14.99

Wicked: Glinda Upland Hardcover Journal
£15.99



Wicked: Emerald City Journal with Ribbon Charm
£15.99

Wicked: Elphaba Thropp Hardcover Journal
£15.99

Wicked: Glinda Upland Pencil Pouch
£10.99

ON SALE NOW

Wicked: Elphaba Thropp Pencil Pouch
£10.99

INSIGHT EDITIONS

© Universal City Studios LLC. All Rights Reserved.

FEATURES

22 DOCTOR WHO
Steven Moffat is under the Christmas tree again.

30 STAR WARS: SKELETON CREW
Lucasfilm gets down with the kids. Sick!

36 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM
To Helm and back with the Tolkien anime.

42 NOSFERATU
Robert Eggers lifts the lid of the tomb of Drac – er, Nosferatu.

52 THE BOX OF DELIGHTS
The wolves just keep on running, 40 years later.

60 A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS
Mark Gatiss enters the marble universe.

66 TERRIFIER 3
I'm funny how? I mean, funny like I'm a clown?

RED ALERT

6 SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3
Keanu Reeves? Awesome, dude.

8 EARTH ABIDES
The classic novel now on TV.

10 BATMAN: DARK PATTERNS
No, not a knit-your-own Bat-suit guide.

12 CREATURE COMMANDOS
James Gunn mobilises the troops. *Ten-hut!*

18 YOUR MONSTER
The beast a man can get.

REVIEWS

80 WICKED
Follow the yellow brick road...

84 AGATHA ALL ALONG
...Then take a left onto the Witches' Road.

91 BLAKE'S 7 SERIES ONE
Fighting the Federation, now on Blu-ray.

94 THE CITY AND ITS UNCERTAIN WALLS
Haruki Murakami takes us to the dream library.

100 THE POWER FANTASY
Time to give the ol' Doomsday Clock a wind.

REGULARS

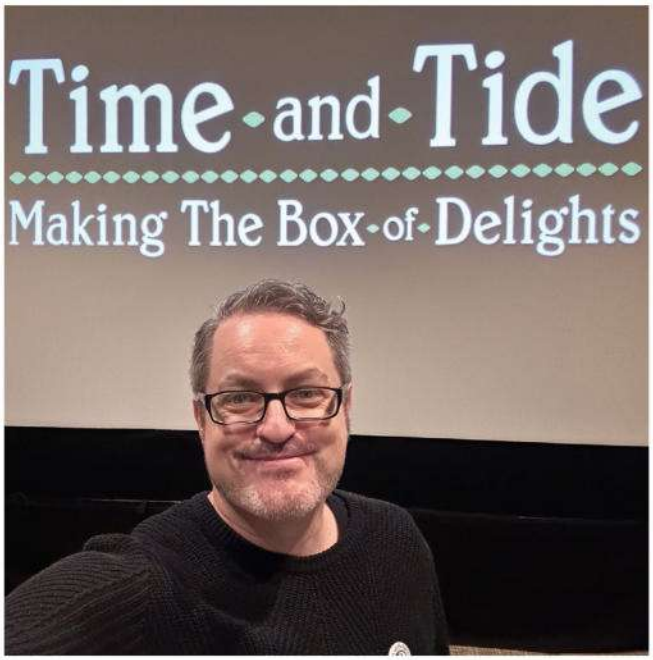
76 BROUGHT TO BOOK
Gail Simone on her new Red Sonja novel.

104 BLASTERMIND
We quiz you on soap stars in sci-fi.

106 TOTAL RECALL
Remembering how *Night Raven* branded us forever.

Captain's Log

© BBC



As the cold air hits the nostrils and the nights draw in, you begin to remember those Christmases past... Not to get all Kate Beringer in *Gremlins* on you, but I find the "festive season" quite difficult since losing loved ones and I no longer really celebrate it. One tradition I *have* stuck with, though, is an annual rewatch of the classic BBC children's drama *The Box Of Delights*.

I was completely blown away by the show when it first aired – Christmas being the time when likings are made, after all. It seemed truly magical to me, and so began a lifelong love of the series and books. I feel like I've been hassling BBC Studios to release a Blu-ray for years now, and believe me I tried my hardest to have an *SFX* event for the 40th – unfortunately Auntie just couldn't make it work.

So I'm delighted to have our own celebration this issue, in addition to the wonderful new documentary by Chris Chapman – available now on that Blu-ray we finally made happen. In some small way we're paying that magic forward, a thank you for wintry wonder when the wolves were running (and that one bit of Christmas I still hold dear).

Happy holidays to all of you at home – see you in four weeks for the start of our 30th anniversary celebrations!

Darren
X

Get in touch!

Email
sfx@futurenet.com

Facebook
facebook.com/SFXmagazine

X/Instagram
Follow @sfxmagazine and tag us!

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Wicked* is absolutely magical.

→ Delighted to see *Agatha All Along* being so well received. I thought it was great. Also brilliant: *The Penguin*. Totally gripped.

→ Being on set for *A Ghost Story For Christmas* is such a thrill, I'm so glad the BBC is still making them.

RANTS

→ Gutted that spooky season is over. But still, ghost stories for Christmas...

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ By the time you read this, I'll have visited the set of *The War Between The Land And The Sea*. I can't swim, so I will be on Team Land.

→ Very happy that *Silo* is back. Didn't they do a good job of redressing the set to turn it into the devastated Silo 17?

→ We missed the boat on this one, but if like me you enjoy seeing Sean Connery in a big red nappy, check out Roger Mitchell's book *Zardoz Speaks To You* (bit.ly/zardozspeaks), a comprehensive 400+page celebration of the bonkers 1974 sci-fi by John Boorman – who's one of the many interviewees.

RIP

→ J Saul Kane, aka Depth Charge – his 1990 track "Dead By Dawn" is surely the best ever use of horror movie samples. Giving my 12" a spin in tribute.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Our former colleagues at *Total Film* have started a newsletter, The Movie Wingman. Sign up at bit.ly/moviewing!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ If you're looking for a sci-fi themed factory game, get *Satisfactory* right now. Warning, though, it WILL take over your life.

RANTS

→ As a big *Dragon Age* fan, *Veilguard* really didn't do it for me. The combat felt more simplistic than *Dragon Age 2* (if that's possible) and that art style was, er... not to my taste.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Completely captivated by Cristin Milioti in *The Penguin*. So many compelling layers to Sofia Falcone. Make sure she's in *The Batman Part II* – and send all the awards her way while you're about it.

→ Finally caught up with *Late Night With The Devil*. Impressed by its impeccably recreated '70s chatshow vibe, and David Dastmalchian was terrific as ever.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Arcane* season two has delivered on every level: unexpected storytelling; emotional character arcs; incredible visuals and animation techniques that continue to push the medium. A real benchmark for adult animation.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

HOLIDAY SPECIAL 2024

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// TIME VARIANCES!

6 RINGS OF POWER

Why *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* is the gold ink script

Highlights

8 EARTH ABIDES

→ The classic 1949 novel becomes a new post-apocalyptic television series. Cheery!

16 RUMOURS

→ World leaders, dead bodies and a giant brain. No, it's not "Time And The Rani".

18 YOUR MONSTER

→ Maybe the monster in your closet isn't really as bad as you think it is...

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Feeling Super Sonic

Director Jeff Fowler talks us through **Sonic**'s biggest adventure yet WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

JEFF FOWLER WAS A BUDDING animator working for Blur Studio when he was tasked with developing the promotional cinematics for *Shadow The Hedgehog*, a game about Sonic's black-haired foe. Little did Fowler know that some 20 years later he would be bringing Shadow to cinemas in *Sonic The Hedgehog 3*. "To think that I'm getting to do the big screen cinematic version," Fowler tells Red Alert, "it's crazy!"

Fowler's been responsible for Sonic's cinematic escapades, having directed the first and second movies, as well as an episode of the spin-off series *Knuckles*. Each outing has been an improvement on the last, with Sonic going from a whip-smart outsider (voiced by Ben Schwartz) to a bona fide hero, defeating Doctor Robotnik (Jim Carrey) with the help of fox sidekick Tails and some human companions. In *Sonic The Hedgehog 3*, he's fully embracing his leadership role. "But then along comes Shadow," says Fowler.

Sonic and Shadow represent two sides of the same coin, but where everything in Sonic's life went right, everything for Shadow has gone wrong. "Shadow really tests him in a way we haven't seen before," Fowler says. "Shadow's got Sonic's speed and Knuckles's strength. He's a very sophisticated character. To have him challenge Sonic and his leadership, it felt like a great basis for a film."

For such an iconic character within Sonic lore, an equally iconic actor was necessary, and Fowler managed to bring Keanu Reeves aboard to voice Shadow. "I'd be lying if I didn't say there was just an obvious corollary between his performance in the *John Wick* films and the vibe we're trying to channel for Shadow. Because Shadow, from a tonal standpoint, is an anti-hero, he's got a little edginess to him. It felt like the perfect fit for Keanu. He gave such a great performance. He knew what we were after, and was excited about playing the character and coming into our world."

Jim Carrey as Ivo Robotnik and Sonic (voiced by Ben Schwartz).

> **"Shadow's got Sonic's speed and Knuckles's strength. He's very sophisticated"**

Fowler has a knack for attracting major talent to his franchise. Idris Elba voices Knuckles, James Marsden and Tika Sumpter play Sonic's human friends, and Jim Carrey – having previously said he was retiring from acting unless a "golden script" came across his table – is back as Robotnik. "That's exactly what Jim got from us," Fowler laughs. "We printed it out with 24-carat ink and delivered it to his doorstep."

Fowler pitched Carrey a third *Sonic* movie that would delve into the Robotnik family's past. "We have a character who's known nothing of love his entire life, and suddenly his grandfather, who he didn't know was still alive,

Lee Majdoub as Agent Stone and Jim Carrey again.

James Marsden (Tom) and Tika Sumpter (Maddie).

Shadow is voiced by Keanu Reeves. Man.

Knuckles, Sonic and Tails all ready to rumble.

shows up," Fowler says. "What does that do to him?" For Carrey, it meant putting on make-up to also play Gerald Robotnik. "I mean, not only did he come back, he came back and did twice as much work," the director continues.

"For him to create a whole new character within the world was certainly an exciting opportunity, and he just went all in. No detail was too small. He helped design the prosthetics and everything. Talking about things to wrap your head around, having made three films with Jim Carrey, that's a real mindbender."

Sonic The Hedgehog 3 doesn't just push Carrey with his multiple roles, but the franchise as a whole. Fowler describes the visual effects and action as both growing in scope – but "not for the sake of scope" – and stresses that Sonic, as a character, has matured. Indeed, while the series continues to be child-friendly, the filmmaking team recognise that the kids who watched the first movie have grown up.

"One of the things that excited us was never repeating what we've done," Fowler says. "Our audience has been growing up with the characters. It's something we saw in the *Harry Potter* series, where from the first film to the last film, there was a real progression. I'm not suggesting we're going to keep going to an extreme, but it's great to find ways to bring new characters into the world that offer something different.

"Sonic's been around for 32 years, so there are so many characters fans would be excited to see. At the end of every instalment, we tease where we're heading next. At the end of the day, that's our blueprint for continuing."

Before the series expands any more – and Fowler won't say which characters could get spin-offs like *Knuckles*, or how many sequels there could be – the team are very much focused on *Sonic The Hedgehog 3*. "But with all these incredible characters," he adds, "you can't help but think, 'What else could we do? Who else could we spin off?'"

Sonic The Hedgehog 3 is in cinemas from 27 December.

SCI-FACT! **Shadow also co-headlines the latest Sonic game, *Sonic x Shadow Generations*, released at the end of October.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Earth Song

Why Todd Komarnicki wanted to give humans something to aspire to in **Earth Abides**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Emma (Jessica Frances Dukes) is ready to do some plantin'.

Ish (Alexander Ludwig): nice place you've got there.

IN TODAY'S MEDIA LANDSCAPE, post-apocalyptic series and movies are so abundant that they've slotted into niche subgenres depicting how humanity gets its cumulative ass handed to it. Pick your visual poison and you can watch it unfold: alien invasions, technology run amuck, environmental desolation... and our current "too close for comfort" scenario, pandemics.

Of course, viral doom storytelling is nothing new. Mary Shelley posited our demise via pandemic in her 1826 novel *The Last Man*. And over 100 years later in 1949, author George R Stewart further explored the repercussions of a pandemic virus in his novel *Earth Abides*, in which he reveals a post-viral mass extinction through the eyes of survivor Isherwood "Ish" Williams.

A graduate student left orphaned, Ish learns how to live off the land, then builds a new society with a handful of other immune survivors. It's taken 75 years, but Stewart's book is now an MGM+ sci-fi series, adapted by creator/showrunner Todd Komarnicki (*Sully*).

With Covid-19 still on a low simmer and climate change on our heels, why tell this even more extreme pandemic tale? Komarnicki tells Red Alert that that he was drawn to how prescient Stewart's view was.

"His was the first post-apocalyptic story, but he was really kind of a naturalist, so he understood what we were doing to the Earth way ahead of everybody else," the showrunner says. "So the book reads as incredibly philosophical to me. Even though it's gripping and has twists and turns and stories, you have

Well, that's one way to get humanity restarted...

> **"The book reads as incredibly philosophical to me. Even though it's gripping"**

the sense of the author himself musing over what it all means. What does it mean to be alive? One of the central questions he keeps asking in the book is: are we part of something larger, or are we just here alone?"

Komarnicki says that kind of existential storytelling was right up his alley, as was the book's non-nihilistic tone, which he transferred to the series. "I have a deep, abiding respect for the book, which is still there," he says. "I've been calling it 'hope-calyptic' as opposed to apocalyptic, because once the characters were on the page and they were interacting... the relationship between Ish and Emma, their love story really is central to the show."

Embodying the series' "hot botanist" version of Ish is actor Alexander Ludwig, whom Komarnicki was greatly impressed with in the series *Vikings* and *Heels*. "I saw him and I thought that there's something really humble about this guy," he remembers. "He's super-strong and he's tall, but he seems kind of vulnerable, especially in *Heels*."

He knew those qualities were required of whoever played Ish, because both the book and the TV series rest on the character's shoulders. "If we don't fall in love with Ish in the first episode, if we don't experience it through his eyes, if we're not asking what would we do, then we're not going to continue with the show," he explains. "A show like this is so completely pinned to the characters."

Komarnicki says they chose wisely, as Ludwig was so invested in the character that he stayed with the production and FaceTimed with his wife as she gave birth to their second child.

Ish's equal partner in rebooting humanity is the older Emma (Jessica Frances Dukes of *Ozark*). Komarnicki says that when she met Ludwig, their chemistry was instant.

"Their capacity to be vulnerable with each other, to trust each other, to encourage each other, was extraordinary," he says with appreciation. "They're really geeked-out friends, and that comes through. You really feel their love for each other in the show."

The characters have to connect deeply, because the six-episode season throws plenty of challenges at them, from pestilence to the last vestiges of operational infrastructure; Komarnicki says Earth heals itself around them, even if they're in its way.

"We are full of these intimate moments that are very captivating, but we don't know when the axe is going to fall on these people," he says of what they must weather. "It's all about knowing something's coming, and it comes in all these different ways throughout the series."

Komarnicki hopes the audience cares, as he says that's what this series is really about. "A society cannot exist without forgiveness, and currently we live in a time where we offer grace to no one," he says.

"There's an end game there, and it's not called humanity. If we want a way forward, we have to be living more gracefully. In a way, like *Earth Abides*, we have to start over. We have to decide to live courageously and lovingly, or we'll be the ones watching Earth abide as it says goodbye to us."

Earth Abides is on MGM+ now. UK details TBC.

SCI-FACT! **Stephen King has said that *Earth Abides* was "a huge influence" for his 1978 novel *The Stand*.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Thwip! **Spider-Man 4** arrives 24 July 2026, directed by *Shang-Chi*'s Daniel Destin Cretton.

→ Henry Cavill joining the live-action take on mecha 'toon **Voltron**.

→ Milla Jovovich to star in **Twilight Of The Dead**, final entry in George Romero's *Living Dead* saga.

→ **Godzilla Minus One**'s Takashi Yamazaki directing the next Big G movie for Toho.

→ Warner Bros developing a big-screen **Game Of Thrones** entry.

→ Ben Mendelsohn starring in subterranean horror **Molepeople** for *The Boogeyman*'s Rob Savage.

→ Paul WS Anderson adapting a new take on Sega classic **The House Of The Dead**.

→ Dave Bautista, Zoë Kravitz, Léa Seydoux and Channing Tatum joining alien invasion comedy **Alpha Gang**.

→ The Wayans Brothers returning for another **Scary Movie**.

→ **Jumanji 3** targeting an 11 December 2026 release.

→ Sequel to **Alien: Romulus** now in development.

→ Kevin Costner to write and star in surf horror **Headhunters**.

DOMINIK BINDL/WIREIMAGE/GETTY

SCI-FACT! **In the novel *Red Dragon*, Will Graham realises Hannibal Lecter is a killer because he inflicts injuries reminiscent of the Wound Man.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Detective Comics

The Dark Knight is going back to his crime-solving roots in new series **Batman: Dark Patterns** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Cover art for issue two, by Hayden Sherman.

JUST AS *THE BATMAN* emphasised the darker aspects of the Caped Crusader, Dan Watters and Hayden Sherman are taking Batman back to basics in their new comic *Dark Patterns*.

"I liked how the film focused on Gotham as a desperate, unhappy place where people are driven to behave in certain ways because they're living in dire straits," says Watters. "That's very much the Gotham we're building here, as it's like the darkest reflection of New York. People from all over the world have moved there, trying to seek their fortune, but have instead found a terrible job market and lots of crazy supervillains who have killed someone they know. No one trusts each other, so people start reverting back to the old myths and legends for comfort."

"Visually, what was key to me about *The Batman* was that it was like a heightened reality where everything was dialled up several notches," continues Sherman. "We're doing that on a comic book scale and we're heightening it even more. I love it when Gotham feels like this overwhelming, all-consuming presence, such as in Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film, where there's this caricature of a terrible city that fills up the screen. In a similar way, we're doing that on the page where if you're standing on a rooftop, there's always taller buildings around you, so you rarely see the sky."

Consisting of four three-issue arcs, the 12-parter takes place during the early days of the Dark Knight's career. "We wanted to cut away all of the continuity and complexities and return to a very [pared] to the bone Batman story," explains Watters.

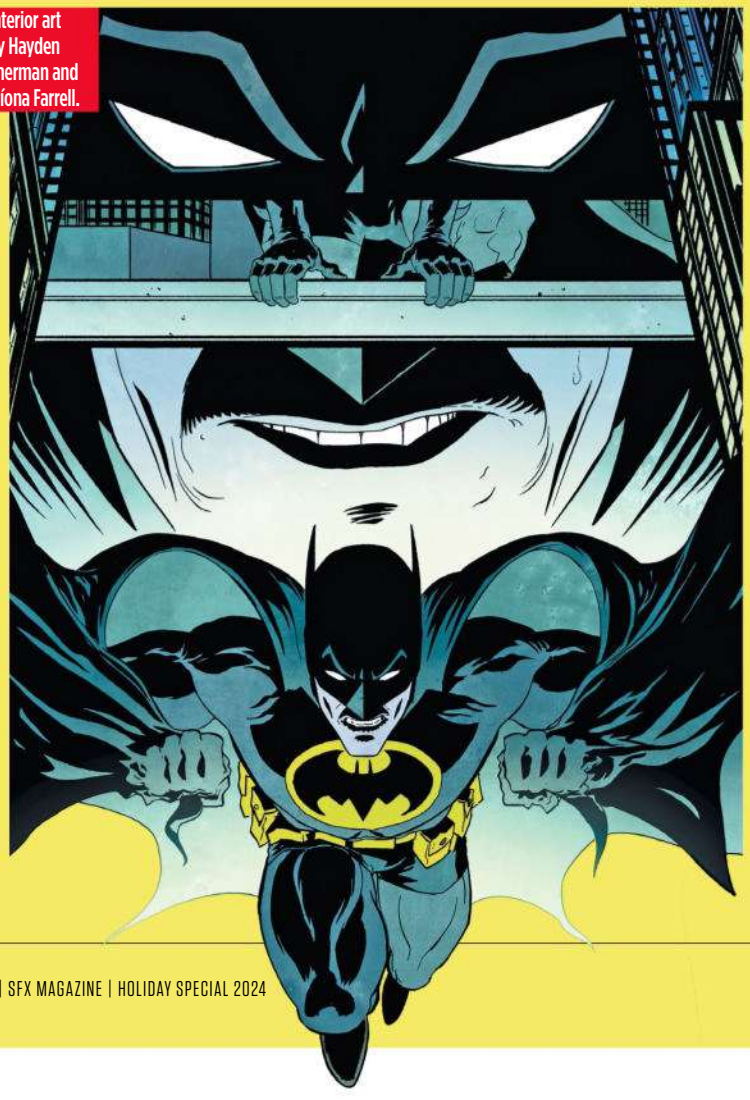
"So it's Batman and there's Alfred in the Batcave helping him, and Commissioner Gordon, and that's about it as far as the supporting cast goes. You won't even see him very much as Bruce Wayne, as these are very much Batman stories, and it's Batman solving crimes."

While Watters reveals that "a familiar face" is at the centre of the second storyline in issues four to six, issue one introduces a new, very disturbing adversary in the Wound Man, who is inspired by a medieval surgical diagram illustrating various bodily injuries. "I've always wanted to base a character on that drawing," he says. "I don't want to give too much away, but I love the idea of a villain that Batman cannot fight. And Hayden's design is really quite nasty."

As the series' title indicates, Watters and Sherman are also playing up Batman's spookiness. "That's something else *The Batman* did in a cool way, as it's Batman as both a detective and as Gotham's kind of shaman," says Watters. "He's this figure that's cloaked in myth, which imbues a certain power.

"He's trying to read the patterns of the city, so there's the forensic pathology side where you're literally trying to pick out patterns in the bones to see what happened to a body, and at the same time you're also trying to interpret the myths, so he's looking for shapes in the psyche of Gotham."

Batman: Dark Patterns issue one is out on 11 December.



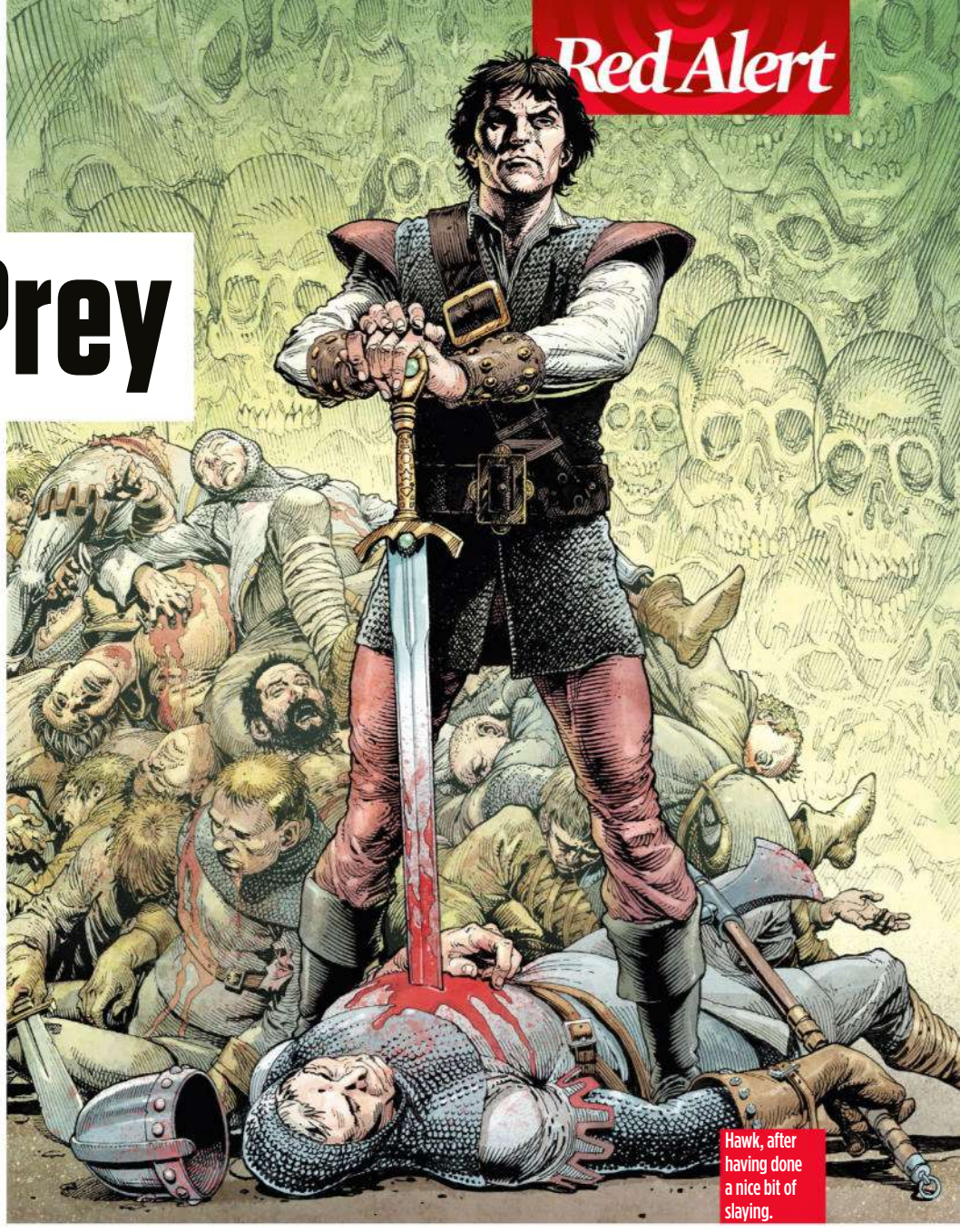
Interior art by Hayden Sherman and Tríona Farrell.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Bird Of Prey

Hawk The Slayer spreads his wings again as the cult British fantasy hero returns to *2000 AD*

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



Hawk, after having done a nice bit of slaying.

ALEC WORLEY CONFESSES THAT the cult 1980 film *Hawk The Slayer* "has been a niche obsession of mine ever since I first saw it on TV as a kid". The writer is now taking charge of Hawk's comic book adventures, scripting a new 10-parter titled "The Last Of Her Kind" for *2000 AD*, which debuts in this month's Christmas prog.

"Decent fantasy movies – at least ones my mum let me watch – were rare as unicorn eggs back then," laughs Worley. "So, like a lot of monster/fantasy kids, I obsessed over curios like *Hawk* because there wasn't that much else out there. It's easy to laugh at it now but there's a genuine magic to it."

Garth Ennis and Henry Flint's 2023 series was set immediately after the end of the film, and Worley is picking up straight after their story's conclusion. He's done plenty of research. "I read the original screenplay, watched and read interviews with [director] Terry Marcel, all to get a sense of his original vision," he says.

"On a separate occasion, I went on a road trip to Black Park where they filmed the movie, and I also managed to find the stretch of shoreline where Hawk rescues Baldin the daft dwarf. I read Garth and Henry's book, making plenty of notes, and coming up with something in between what they did and the movie, although it's closer in spirit to the original."

While the first volume was more of an ensemble piece, Worley is focusing on Hawk himself. "We didn't have room for a big group adventure," he continues. "We've started to open out the world a bit, and we've also brought back the roguish Fitzwalter, who didn't appear in Garth and Henry's book."

Worley says *Hawk The Slayer* is very different to his revival of the '70s/'80s IPC character Black Beth, whose exploits he returned to once again in the recent 2025 *Treasury Of British Comics Annual*.

"They're both sword and sorcery tales but Beth is more swashbuckling, more Ray Harryhausen, whereas Hawk is more low-key and realistic," he explains. "I tried to set myself the rule for the comic that it didn't contain anything that couldn't be filmed on a low budget.

"I love the very British grubbiness of fantasy movies like *Monty Python And The Holy Grail*, *Jabberwocky*, *Excalibur* and *Hawk*, which have all fed into British grimdark fantasy like *Warhammer* and Joe Abercrombie. But what I was really looking to build was the stuff that Hawk actually does really well: fast pace, characterful cast, great atmosphere and a fearless commitment to its own premise, along with some deft dabs of worldbuilding."

Worley introduces a new villain in Lady Morlaine, the ruler of a city who is possessed by an evil spell gone wrong. "Hawk must prevent this once-noble knight from destroying the city over which she rules," he teases, who says he's enjoyed collaborating with artist Simon Coleby. "His pages are just drenched in atmosphere. They put me in mind of Iain McCaig's classic *Fighting Fantasy* illustrations."

Hawk The Slayer returns to 2000 AD in Prog 2413, out on 18 December.

SCI-FACT! **A large part of *Hawk The Slayer*'s £600K budget was made up of the fee for Jack Palance, who played the evil Voltan.**

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

Going Commando

Creature Commandos producer Dean Lowry on launching James Gunn's DC Universe

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

WHEN JAMES GUNN and Peter Safran announced they were relaunching DC's cinematic universe, everyone had questions, and in the two years since then, Gunn – director of *The Suicide Squad* and the *Peacemaker* spin-off – has spent a great deal of time offering answers.

Yet one thing still baffles many people: why launch this brand new take on the DC universe with *Creature Commandos*, an animated series about a group of literal monsters brought together to save the day?

The answer, it turns out, is simple happenstance. "James wrote the whole season before he was the president of DC," Dean Lorey, who serves as executive producer, tells Red Alert. "He didn't go into it saying, 'This is going to be the premiere show for my DC Universe'. He was writing it and then it happened that he became head of DC. The path to a green light was pretty easy for him!"

Things started happening pretty fast for Gunn from there; not only was he running an entire studio, but directing a new take on *Superman* (the first movie in the newly named DC Universe) and continuing *Peacemaker*. *Creature Commandos* soon fell to Lorey, who was picked to run the show following his stint in charge of *Harley Quinn*.

"There was definitely more pressure [doing this] than you would normally get doing an animated show," he says. "But the truth is, it didn't really affect anything. We just made the show as well as we could. It ended up being, I think, really representative of [Gunn's] vision. It has enormous heart, comedy, warmth, and it's exciting."

Creature Commandos certainly feels in keeping with Gunn's previous projects. It brings together a hodge-podge of characters: there's Nina Mazursky (Zoë Chao), an amphibian scientist; GI Robot (Sean Gunn), a robot built with the single purpose of killing Nazis; Weasel (also Sean Gunn), the murderous mutant weasel; Doctor Phosphorus (Alan Tudyk), a radioactive, fiery skeleton; and the Bride (Indira Varma), of the Frankenstein variety.

In addition, Viola Davies returns as Amanda Waller and Frank Grillo debuts as Rick Flag Sr, father of the deceased Rick Flag Jr, ahead of making his live-action debut as the character in *Superman*.

"Just one sugar – I'm watching my weight."

"Maybe we should aim at the same thing?" "Nah."

Doctor Phosphorus, voiced by Alan Tudyk.

"Each character has a very distinct point of view," Lorey says. "Like, Nina Mazursky's the heart of the show. She's incredibly sweet. Then there's Weasel, who's chaos, and the Bride who is almost the lead. She has enormous drive and determination. GI Robot finds his humanity as it goes along."

The series does have an overarching plot, in which the Commandos must keep Maria Bakalova's Princess Ilana from being harmed by a group of wayward alt-right types, led by the villain Circe. But each episode delves deeper into a single character's background. The most moving might just be the one about Weasel.

"James was incredibly touched by the Weasel episode and its journey," Lorey says. "That one's sad and meaningful. There's certainly a lot of action, which people are expecting, but it's the sweetness and sadness that's unexpected."

"We just made the show as well as we could. It ended up being really representative of James's vision"

Confusingly, it's unclear whether this Weasel is the same one from *The Suicide Squad*. Even though this is a rebooted DC Universe, *Commandos* references Project Starfish, and Davies's Waller discusses the events of Gunn's film.

Gunn has essentially said that anything referenced in the new DC Universe is canon, but not everything about those movies and shows is strictly canon. Lorey, for his part, just let the new man in charge decide what was canon or not.

"I wasn't really worried about canon because that was a James thing," he says with a smile. "I mean, he wrote the scripts, he was the one that said, 'This is canon!' It was interesting to work on something that started out as canon, as opposed to *Harley*, which was never canon. In fact, that exists in what we've been calling the Harley-verse."

Gunn has also spoken about how actors in new DC projects will play their characters across movies, TV shows and games.

"First and foremost for this, we were thinking about the voice acting," says Lorey. "However, we really did want people that would be great for any live-action version. James was really specific about who he thought would be great for both versions. I just had to make sure that they were going to work for him in that sense.

"Alan Tudyk, who in *Harley* plays Joker and Clayface, plays Doctor Phosphorus in this and he's great. He's a guy who goes very easily between voice work and live-action acting. He also plays Clayface [here], a very different version of Clayface than the *Harley Quinn* version, but it was fun to cast him in the same role in two very different ways."

Exactly who will make the jump to live-action remains to be seen, but whatever the case, there could be more *Creature Commandos*. "It could go on for multiple seasons, and we've talked about it," Lorey says. "James would like to write the future seasons if he can. It's a little dependent on James having the time. But it's designed to go on for multiple seasons." Looks like the Commandos are set to stay...

Creature Commandos is on Max in the US from 5 December.

SCI-FACT! ***Creature Commandos*** **was recently resurrected as a comic book, written by David Dastmalchian.**

SCI-FACT! **Kirby spent five years at DC in the early '70s, creating not only *New Gods* but also OMAC, the Demon and Kamandi.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

(Right) Cover art by Carmine Di Giandomenico.

Worlds Collide

The DCU and the Absolute Universe come together in **New Gods**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

SEEKING A CHANGE AFTER wrapping up his *Detective Comics* run, Ram "V" Venkatesan is now reviving Jack Kirby's eclectic pantheon of deific beings, the New Gods, whose diverse ranks include Orion, the Forever People, Mister Miracle and Big Barda.

"I wanted to work on some characters that hadn't been seen for a while, which would allow some room for reinvention and a new take," says V, teaming up with Evan Cagle, who also illustrated his recent Dark Horse Comics miniseries *Dawnrunner*.

"I also wanted to do something big and expansive, and then I realised there was this whole universe of characters that wasn't doing much. So I said to DC, 'I want to take on the Fourth World and all of the related characters, history and stories behind them.'"

V has used Kirby's ambitious but short-lived original series, which ran for 11 issues from 1971 to 1972, as a starting point for his own epic storyline. "I'm riffing off what Kirby did in a more thematic sense, in that he borrowed from Greco-Roman mythology to fashion these characters," he continues. "Beyond comics, my influences include *The Lord Of The Rings* and Frank Herbert's *Dune* as well as Denis Villeneuve's films. I've also taken influence from world mythology, as the story structure is based around the Hindu end of the world myth."

With Darkseid having departed the main DCU for the nascent Absolute universe in the recent DC *All-In* one-shot, the New Gods will act as a crucial bridge between the two realities. "The New Gods are embroiled in the struggles of both universes, even if they might not know it," explains V.

"They're pivotal to the conflux of the two universes and they're probably the only group that has access to both universes, as they will come to find out. And, of course, with Darkseid no longer being present in one universe, that throws a lot of things out of balance. For every good there has to be a bad, so what happens when the bad goes away? Worse things come out of the shadows..."

Ominous prophecies and the death of an old god have some devastating reverberations not only on the New Gods' twin home worlds, but on this planet as well. V reveals that "About halfway through the first year, the New Gods and the mainstream DCU characters will all collide and come into conflict and drama with each other.

"In the first few issues, we're focused on the struggles of Highfather on New Genesis and DeSaad and Granny Goodness on Apokolips, while the drama on Earth is largely centred on Orion, Mister Miracle and Big Barda," he teases.

"There are a few other gods who show up here and there, but I will keep them a secret. Metron is involved – and then there are also some Earthly villains!"

New Gods issue one is out on 18 December.

Art from the first issue, by Pere Pérez.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Time Twisters

Loki season two writer Katharyn Blair on scripting the **TVA**'s first comic book miniseries

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

More choice snippets from issue one, by Pere Pérez.

AFTER WANDERING the corridors of the Time Variance Authority in her position as a writer on *Loki* season two, Katharyn Blair is now scripting the temporal organisation's first ever miniseries, teaming up on the five-parter with artist Pere Pérez.

"It's been really unique because I've got to know these characters while writing them for TV," she tells Red Alert. "I was on set from the start of filming to the day we wrapped, so I was walking around for months.

"It was surreal to start almost every day walking down the halls of the TVA. Now I get to continue the work alone, sat at my desk, with the TVA just existing in my mind, which is very cool."

With, as Blair acknowledges, the TVA having "existed before *Loki* put it on the screen", she was mindful of the organisation's previous appearances in the Marvel Universe.

"I want to make sure to honour that legacy," she says, confirming that several original characters from *Loki*, including Miss Minutes, will make their comic book debuts. "OB" Ouroboros is also present after recently guesting in *Spider-Gwen: Ghost Spider*. "Miss Minutes is such a presence – her voice is so distinctive. It's fun to put her on the page."

Ranging from Peggy Carter to Ghost Spider and a lovelorn Gambit, the TVA's ranks are drawn from various timelines and realities. "There's some characters that I've loved since I was a kid, like Spider-Gwen and Gambit, who I was excited to bring to the TVA," adds Blair. "There are characters you can expect to see that you know from the show, and some other Marvel staples that are my little secret for now!"

Describing it as "always fun and complicated", Blair appreciates the endless canvas provided by time travel. "It makes my brain hurt in the best way," she laughs. "The TVA is a unique challenge and a fun playground in that it's a place that exists outside of time, so we can meet any character at any point in their arc."

Emulating the events of *Loki*, the TVA will experience some considerable upheaval. "The TVA has always been a certain way – it has rules and protocol and hasn't deviated from them," explains Blair. "Now we see a TVA trying to pivot as it's trying to be something different... something better. I've been thinking a lot about legacy and history, as these characters are inheriting a TVA that has existed for aeons.

"It has done good things and also bad things, and new intentions or not, the skeletons are still in the closet. So how do you deal with those skeletons when you find them? That's the conundrum the team is facing."

Blair is also enjoying collaborating with Pérez. "I love how he'll think of a strange way to depict conflict and conversation," she adds.

TVA issue one is out 18 December.

SCI-FACT! **Debuting in 1986's *Thor* 372, the TVA was created by Walt Simonson and Sal Buscema as a tribute to editor Mark Gruenwald.**

DIRECTORS EXCLUSIVE

Follow The Leaders

Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson and Galen Johnson on **Rumours**, their oddball G7 Summit apocalypse

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

IF THE PLANET WAS IN PERIL, there are heroic teams you could rely on to save the day: the Fantastic Four, for example, or maybe the Secret Six. The G7, however... well, they'd be about as much use as the Famous Five.

Set during the latest gathering for leaders of the major industrialised democracies at a country estate, *Rumours* centres on the heads of state of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the USA.

Fruitlessly striving, throughout a working lunch, to formulate a generic statement on a global crisis, it slowly dawns on them that they're in the midst of a more localised one. Their entourages have mysteriously vanished. Encountering reanimated bog bodies, they set out through the woods to find help – in the process stumbling upon an enormous disembodied brain.

It's the work of a directorial triumvirate: Guy Maddin, whose filmography stretches back to handcrafted cult items like 1988's *Tales From The Gimli Hospital*, and fellow Canadians Evan and Galen Johnson, regular collaborators since 2015.

Aww, look at their happy little faces. For now.

So why the G7? "It started showing up in earlier scripts we'd been writing, just as a tiny subplot that made us giggle," Maddin tells Red Alert. "Then we'd throw the script out because it became unwieldy, but the G7 would pop in again. There were three or four scripts before we finally went, 'Let's just make a movie about the G7 already! Start with something simple: seven characters, one setting, one location.'"

He downplays any notion that the film is political satire. "The G7 are a satire *already*," Maddin argues. "There's so much empty pageantry, it's already a finished product. When you watch their opening ceremonies where they're presenting themselves to the world, legitimising each other by their presence in each other's company, and their attempts to make an Olympiad of their existence... all that stuff is kind of delightful. That's just inherently funny."

For a Maddin/Johnson/Johnson film, *Rumours* has some surprisingly big names.

"What do we do now?" "I dunno... a press release?"

The world leaders pose with Joe Biden (centre).

Charles Dance is a US President prone to nodding off – sound familiar? Cate Blanchett, meanwhile, plays the German Chancellor – who at one point does the dirty with the Canadian PM (Roy Dupuis). Maddin contacted Blanchett via Ari Aster, a mutual friend. A huge fan of the trio's experimental film *The Green Fog* (2017), she jumped at the chance.

"They're extraordinary people, all of them," says Evan Johnson. "We stuck close to the script. But beyond improvising dialogue, which they didn't do, there's so much improvised energy and ideas. There are lots of lines that weren't funny on the page, then suddenly Cate can find a way of making almost any sentence funny. Likewise Charles."

The fact that Dance makes no attempt at an appropriate accent adds to the general air of absurdity. "The only problem I was having with the idea of doing a G7 movie is that the American President has been depicted in so many movies, there didn't seem to be a new way of doing it," explains Maddin. "When one of these guys said, 'Let's make him British', I went, 'Voilà! Problem solved.'"

"It is confusing," Evan Johnson acknowledges, "but it's a certain kind of confusion that teaches you how to watch the movie – or that it's okay to be confused. If you watch for long enough you'll start to get in the flow of it. By the midpoint, you don't care any more that the American President has an English accent."

Though *Rumours* is a truly weird affair, by the standards of Maddin's idiosyncratic filmography it's comparatively conventional, we suggest. "Right – it's shot in colour, it's in focus, it's on location, and it's got stars," the auteur director says. "I always wanted to reach people. I wasn't making movies just for myself. So I've been working on it... I'm a slow but inexorable learner!"

"We decided we wanted to make a movie out of the G7, and that suggests a filming style not quite like what he and we have done before," says Galen Johnson. "So the style comes out of the substance."

It was a challenge for Maddin, though. "Much of the time, in the films we've made, he's holding the camera," Evan Johnson explains. "Part of how he sees a film coming together is through the camera. With this, we had a big camera, not the kind of thing you can hold. So that immediately took Guy out of the process that he was used to."

> **"The Prime Minister running through the forest, crying – that was me a few times"**

"Operating the camera became the job of skilled technicians," Maddin continues. "It took away the *caméra-stylo* – took the child in the kindergarten art period out of it. But that's the style required. There's a best style for everything, and I think we found it for this.

"At times, I wanted to go running back to my old ways," the director adds, before making reference to the film's most highly-strung character. "The Canadian Prime Minister running through the forest, crying – that was me a few times! But it was too late to turn back. These guys propped me up, and we kept going. And I'm really glad we did."

Rumours is in cinemas from 6 December.

ALAN RESURRECTION

The directors take stock

The end credits of *Rumours* reveal a prominent contribution by a Brit. The soundtrack features nine tracks by the late Alan Hawkshaw, a library music legend whose cues include "Chicken Man" and "Best Endeavours" – aka the *Grange Hill* and *Channel 4 News* themes.

"He had an album with Brian Bennett called *Full Circle* a few years ago that I love," explains Evan, "and we like that kind of music. It's cheap to get, because it's made to be cheap. But we've always been enamoured of him in particular."

"If you go to a stock music library these days, all the music is contemporary," Galen adds. "This stuff has period flavours, and it brings to mind television soap operas – it's very evocative. We wanted to bring some of those flavours into this G7 soap opera we've made."

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

STEVE EICHNER/WWD/GETTY

- Pass the pig's blood! Mike Flanagan adapting Stephen King's **Carrie** for Prime Video.
- Tatiana Maslany joining **Star Trek: Starfleet Academy**, already renewed for a second season.
- Aaron Pierre is Green Lantern John Stewart in DC Comics show **Lanterns**.
- Marvel's **Daredevil: Born Again** debuts 4 March 2025, with **Ironheart** following on 24 June and **Wonder Man** arriving in December.
- *Prey*'s Amber Midthunder joining season two of **Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters**.
- **Velma** cancelled after two seasons and a Halloween special.
- *Battlestar Galactica*'s Ronald D Moore to showrun videogame adaptation **God Of War**.
- **Tomb Raider: The Legend Of Lara Croft** renewed for a second season.
- **Good Omens** to wrap with a 90-minute finale in place of a full third season.
- David Fincher developing an American **Squid Game** as a series.
- Netflix's **Kaos** cancelled after just one season. Those whom the gods love die young...

SCI-FACT! **The film's title was inspired by a list of "great album titles" with the 1977 Fleetwood Mac LP at the top.**

Melissa Barrera is ready to let it all out as Laura.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Love Makes Monsters Of Us All

Caroline Lindy embraces the rage in her debut feature **Your Monster**

WORDS: **CLARISSE LOUGHREY**

"HE'S A MONSTER, BUT THIS IS LIKE A BILLY Crystal version of a monster, you know?" director Caroline Lindy tells Red Alert. Her debut, horror-musical-romcom *Your Monster*, may feature a hairy, snarling beast as its male lead, but he's pretty cute when you get to know him.

As played by Tommy Dewey (under a layer of prosthetics), Monster is gently encouraging, with a Chardonnay-dry sense of humour. If he hadn't taken up permanent residency under the bed, and inside the closet, of human Laura Franco (Melissa Barrera), you'd find him browsing the albums at a local record shop, probably in a cardigan.

He's the combined creation of Lindy, Dewey, and David LeRoy Anderson, a special effects make-up designer whose past credits include *Death Becomes Her*, *Men In Black*, and *American Horror Story*. Together, they took inspiration from Ron Perlman's character in the '80s television series *Beauty And The Beast*, David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, Ali Abbasi's 2018 troll fantasy *Border*, both the Cowardly Lion and the Scarecrow from *The Wizard Of Oz*, and Guillermo del Toro's entire menagerie of creatures.

He's a monster, but one that Laura (and the audience) can't help but fall in love with. When she's diagnosed with cancer and immediately dumped by her boyfriend Jacob (Edmund Donovan), Laura feels the rage start to burn in her stomach and Monster is finally coaxed out of his closet. The film is really a self-love story, about a woman learning to embrace what she's always been denied.

"She has to externalise all these feelings and make it this other being that she can fall in love with in order to deal with herself," Lindy says, "to give her the love she can't really give herself."

Barrera was tailor-made for the part: a certified scream queen thanks to *Abigail* and the *Scream* franchise, with a music background and a breakout role in the screen adaptation of Broadway show *In The Heights*. But the romcom genre was new territory for the actor. It's what ultimately sold her on the project. As she vowed to Lindy, "I'll take a risk on you, if you take a risk on me."

Laura is a Broadway performer, and Jacob not only killed their relationship, but took with him the lead role he'd promised her in a musical which he'd never have been able to write without her: a *Spring Awakening*-like tale of

Laura and the Monster: what a wholesome couple.

Tommy Dewey as the Monster: he's a big ol' teddy bear!

> I was surrounded by horrifying images of what my life could be like

rebellious school girls that he insists is his "love letter to women".

Lindy, who started out as an actor, describes her withering take on Jacob as a catharsis not only for her own experiences, but for the all-too-familiar trope of the "angry, male director who gets to act like they're king". The film's songs were provided by musical theatre duo The Lazours, with lead track "My Stranger" offering Barrera the opportunity to belt her heart out and let her emotions explode across the screen.

Once you strip out the fantasy, *Your Monster* is really Lindy's story. She was also dumped after a cancer diagnosis. "I was so angry," she says, "and I was so afraid of what was coming out of me. I was surrounded by horrifying images of what my life could be like, or what I was turning into, and it felt like a horror story in that moment. I dove into the script as a means to get over the pain of what had happened to me. Once you get it out of your body and put it into a script, it becomes something else, and it becomes something for other people. It doesn't feel like it's just yours any more, which releases and lightens the load."

But fury that buried can be hard to access. And, as *Your Monster* explores, it can be especially hard for women, who are rarely given the platform for any expression that might be deemed impolite or unruly. It was a challenge for Barrera. "For many women, it's hard to get that angry in front of so many people," Lindy explains. "And Melissa was nervous, you know? There are so many scenes where she's out of control in the best possible way."

"I had to push her because she was, like, 'I don't know. Is this too big? Do I sound crazy?' I'm like, 'That's the point! If you feel it's crazy, if you feel out of control, that is the point of this movie.' I'm just so proud of her."

Your Monster is in cinemas now.

SCI-FACT! **David LeRoy Anderson is married to *A Nightmare On Elm Street*'s Heather Langenkamp; they own VFX outfit AFX Studio.**

SCI-FACT! **Jeri Taylor's son Alexander Enberg played Vulcan ensign Vorik on *Star Trek: Voyager*.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

JERI TAYLOR 1938-2024

Remembering a major creative force in *Star Trek*

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

BY ALL ACCOUNTS there was much of Jeri Taylor in a certain starship captain. "She wanted Kathryn Janeway to be a significant part of her legacy," said Kate Mulgrew, who brought the character to the screen in *Star Trek: Voyager*, "and I think there is no doubt that in that endeavour she succeeded."

The writer and showrunner even gave Janeway her own birthplace: Bloomington, Indiana. Graduating in English from Indiana University, Taylor ran an acting workshop in Los Angeles and directed local theatre before launching a career as a TV scriptwriter in the late 1970s. With genre credits on *The Incredible Hulk*, SF comedy *Salvage One* and *The Secret Empire*, she also served as producer on *Quincy, ME* and *Jake And The Fatman*.

Jeri Taylor pictured in a 1995 publicity shot.

Taylor entered the 24th century on the recommendation of *Quincy* writer Lee Sheldon. After penning season four episode "Suddenly Human" she joined *Star Trek: The Next Generation* as staff writer, with a mandate to strengthen the show's female characters. "If there's anything I wanted to do more of, it was developing the characters of Crusher and Troi," she recalled.

Taylor's own *Next Generation* episodes include "Night Terrors", "The Drumhead" and season five's "The Outcast": "That message about the importance of tolerance was very important to me."

By the final season she was executive producer and showrunner and went on to serve in the same capacity on *Voyager*, co-created with Rick Berman and Michael Piller. "It was my fantasy that Janeway was me and I tried to approach it like that," she remembered. Taylor also wrote three *Trek* novels for Pocket Books, including an adaptation of *Next Gen* story "Unification".

She retired in 1998, handing *Voyager* to Brannon Braga, who stated in tribute to her that Janeway "reflected the best dimensions of Jeri herself."

PARAMOUNT TELEVISION / COURTESY: EVERETT COLLECTION

RON ELY 1938-2024

American actor best known as TV's Tarzan and the lead in *Doc Savage – Man Of Bronze*.

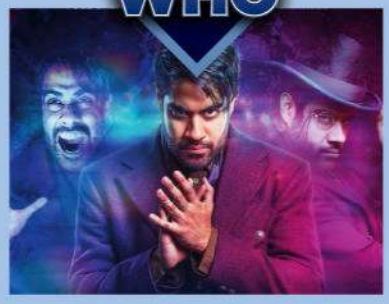
PAUL MORRISSEY 1938-2024

Director and Warhol associate known for *Flesh For Frankenstein* and *Blood For Dracula*.

SFX

SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO



- Big Finish has revealed cover art for a number of new releases. *Gallifrey: Echoes Through Eternity* is a collection of short stories released this month to celebrate 20 years of the *Gallifrey* series.
- Out in December is *The Eighth Doctor Adventures: Deadly Strangers*, three new adventures starring Paul McGann.
- Also starring Paul McGann, *The Stuff of Legend – The Live Show* is released in December across a number of limited edition packages including T-shirts and tote bags.
- The Second Doctor faces a (sometimes) familiar enemy in *Zygon Century: Infiltration*, out in January.
- Finally, *The Companion Chronicles: Families* sees further adventures for Susan, Vicki, Steven and Dodo in four new adventures due for release in April.
- Ncuti Gatwa appeared on BBC's *Children In Need* on Friday 15 November to introduce an exclusive preview of the Christmas episode "Joy To The World".
- As part of Children In Need, two unique *Doctor Who* items were auctioned by Propstore – the "damaged TARDIS" prop from "Eve Of The Daleks" and Astrid Peth's waitress costume as worn by Kylie Minogue in "Voyage Of The Damned".
- Titan has released exclusive new merchandise. A 3" Classic Fifteenth Doctor vinyl figure, as well as a Fourteenth and Fifteenth Doctors Bi-Generation pack will be available from forbiddenplanet.com in late December. Also available as part of the Titan vinyl figure range is a 6.5" Snow Effect TARDIS from "The Church On Ruby Road". This will be available exclusively from thewhoshop.com.

YOUR FIRST ISSUE FREE!

SUBSCRIBE TO 2000 AD!

2000 AD®

THE GALAXY'S GREATEST COMIC

DISCOVER THE BEST COMICS IN THE GALAXY WITH A 2000 AD PRINT SUBSCRIPTION - DELIVERED DIRECTED TO YOUR DOOR EVERY WEEK!

PLUS GET REGULAR EXCLUSIVE OFFERS AND YOUR FIRST ISSUE IS FREE!*

Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play

EXCLUSIVE OFFERS SENT WHEN YOU OPT-IN TO MARKETING EMAILS. TERMS & CONDITIONS APPLY. VISIT 2000AD.COM FOR DETAILS.

THE TOY

STEVEN MOFFAT BOOKS US INTO THE TIME HOTEL IN THIS YEAR'S **DOCTOR WHO** CHRISTMAS SPECIAL

WORDS:
NICK SETCHFIELD

BRINGER

"THERE'S THE ORIENT EXPRESS AND A DINOSAUR," laughs Steven Moffat. "What more do you want at Christmas?" If both those items feature on your festive wishlist then Santa has clearly been listening – albeit a Santa cunningly disguised as a BAFTA-winning Scotsman.

"Joy To The World" marks the ninth *Doctor Who* Christmas special written by Moffat, the former showrunner whose fiendish, puzzle-box brain not only uncaged the Weeping Angels but minted the ever-useful phrase "timey-wimey". And this era-hopping seasonal blow-out promises to be truly, deeply timey-wimey.

"It's quite big in scope," Moffat tells *SFX*. "We go to a lot of places in a short amount of time!" Along for the ride is *Derry Girls* star Nicola Coughlan as Joy, a woman whose life is upended forever when she meets Ncuti Gatwa's dazzling Doctor – along with a fourth-dimensional threat that could seriously scupper the celebrations.

"It's got your Christmas whimsy in there, so I suppose it leans toward the slightly more humorous end, to a degree," says Moffat of the story's tone.

"But actually it gets quite emotional, and there's also the fun element that within the context of the wider series the Doctor has just lost one of his mates. He's lost Ruby. So that puts the Doctor in a particular place, and in the modern show we've always honoured that. So it's the Doctor alone – which makes it sound sombre, and it's really not.

"It's whimsical and heartwarming and emotional. It's not 'Blink'. That's how they review all my episodes – it's not 'Blink'!"

"What kind of two-bit joint are you running?"

How does it feel to be writing the *Doctor Who* Christmas special again?

◆ It wasn't that I was bursting with ideas to do another Christmas episode! Russell got in touch and said, "Could you do Christmas for me? I need to get on to series two!" [laughs] and I was delighted to say yes, because I always loved doing the Christmas ones.

I'd been talking for years about doing a sort of door-flapping French farce, *Doctor Who* style, and I'd never done it. Russell said, "Well, why don't we do that for Christmas?" and there's an element of that in there. An element of doors and running and confusion.

But not very much, because I think if that's what you did at Christmas people would say, "Oh, I was hoping for a proper one!" If it's the only episode you're going to get for months it should have more size to it, more scale. I'm not promising I won't do it sometime in the future, obviously. But that's not what this is.

So what will we get?

◆ Here's the pitch that got me the job. You know in just about every hotel room you've been in there's a locked door? It's weird, but there always is. Okay. We're about to blow apart the truth of that. In the far future there is a place called the Time Hotel, and the Time Hotel has realised something brilliant, which is following the discovery of time travel they now have an opportunity to sell all the rooms they failed to sell the last time. So they have built extensions into more or less every hotel room in history, and you get access to it occasionally.

When that room is not booked in what we call a contemporaneous booking, somebody from the future can go and stay there. So you can sell walking tours in the Blitz with a handy map. And as the Doctor says, this finally explains why there was no room at the inn...

So the Doctor lands in the Time Hotel and gets involved in an adventure there, because evil forces are about to put it to a terrible use. I actually got so obsessed with the premise that I wrote half the script and realised I'd done nothing but make jokes about the Time Hotel. I think that's a nice big, splashy, Christmassy idea. And it will have kids rattling at the locked door in hotel rooms!

Those doors are terrifying, especially at three in the morning when you wake up and think, "Could someone actually walk into the room at this point?"

◆ Yes! Why is it somebody else's decision that it's locked? Why is it not mine? It's my bloody room, and I don't have the key to it! That's because of the Time Hotel...

This story zips around times and places

ALL PICTURES: LARA CORNELL, JAMES PARDON/BBC STUDIOS. STOCK ART: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

Ncuti Gatwa as the Doctor, with Nicola Coughlan as Joy.

in the way that only *Doctor Who* can do. Have you missed that kind of storytelling, being away from the show for so many years?

◆ I must have – but then in "Boom" I stuck him in a crater, on a mine, so I didn't do any zipping about! I told it in absolutely linear order and practically real time. But yes, it's a thing you can do, and when you're playing *Doctor Who* as epic, as a big, splashy Christmas Day spectacular, that's a good thing to do.

On those occasions, for first episodes, finales and for Christmas episodes, you want to splash about a bit. We actually lost a whole location – we lost ancient Egypt and the pyramids, for one scene. But we got Everest back. People don't get involved in *Doctor Who* at a production level in order to do a chamber piece. They actually want to be stretched. So on the first draft I've always just pushed it as far as I can, and I've always been rather astonished by how close we get to what I first came up with.

How does Joy drive the story?

◆ Joy is someone who's not in a good place in her life, but she's the sort of person where you only know how sad they are because they smile so much. She's putting a brave face on things, but is actually profoundly miserable for reasons that emerge as the story goes on – which is good, because the Doctor can come along and have an impact on her life.

> **"For first episodes, finales and Christmas episodes, you want to splash about a bit"**

What does Nicola Coughlan bring to the role?

◆ Well, she brings that smile, apart from everything else! She's got a good line in smiling →

Quizzing the Hotel Manager (Jonathan Aris).

through, which is rather lovely, and she brings great charm and is tremendously sympathetic. Whatever happens, whatever she does, you're going to be on her side.

Is there a particular pleasure in writing a one-off companion? Somehow it always feels like we're slightly spying on the Doctor when we see him between companions...

◆ I think that's because you have a weird sense that the show isn't really about the Doctor. It's about whoever he meets. *Doctor Who* does not begin with him stealing the TARDIS and running away. It begins with the schoolteachers following Susan home, and encountering him.

When it begins again [in 2005] it begins with Rose, trying to work out who he is. So you do experience him through the eyes of the companions. The moment there isn't a companion in situ you're sort of thinking, "There he is, alone in his TARDIS..."

We do go into that a bit in this one, as to what actually goes on in that weird man's head when he's got no one to be the Doctor for.

Are you writing for Ncuti's Doctor, or are you simply writing for the Doctor with the confidence that Ncuti will bring himself to it?

◆ 90% of it is writing the Doctor. If you were writing the Doctor too differently then people wouldn't think it was the Doctor.

So there's an awful lot of the character that remains pretty much exactly the same and has done for a very long while, but you accommodate the fact that sometimes he's older, sometimes he's younger, sometimes he's grumpy or sometimes he's more cheerful. But he's usually all of those things. So I don't think writing the Doctor is massively different. There are turns of phrase you might suddenly find yourself using because it's coming out of a different mouth in a different accent, but for the most part you write the Doctor, and he plays it.

> "I was keen to see him go mean. He does go a bit mean for once in this, for quite a while"

But in that remaining 10% are there flavours that Ncuti brings to the role that you were keen to explore? Or possibly push him into new areas?

◆ I was keen to see him go mean. He does go a bit mean for once in this, and he does it for quite a long while. I always think that at some point the ancient beast has got to snarl, or you don't think it's him.

Underneath whatever set of flourishes and fripperies he's currently sporting, he's still that same bloke. He's quite dangerous and he can be bracingly unsentimental when he wants to be.

Oh dear. It might be time to start running.

When you were showrunner you were very much aware that *Doctor Who* was facing some big changes in the way that people actually watch television. You saw the future coming – and those changes have only accelerated. What are the challenges now for *Who*'s future?

As I was endlessly trying to do back in the day, you have to explain to people that you can't run the [ratings] numbers the way you used to. It makes no sense. The fact that people will binge-watch it possibly three or four months later means that you don't get that gorgeous number to hold up and say "Look how successful it is!" It's still hugely successful but you have to batter through all that nonsense, which I find quite tiresome. I don't have to do it myself any more, Russell has to do all that nonsense, but it is rubbish, especially when a show with smaller ratings than *Doctor Who* is being heralded as a hit. It really gets on my wick.

Another challenge is how serialised modern television has become. Even when I was doing *Doctor Who*, most shows were still story-of-the-week, really. But everything is a complex serial now. Jed Mercurio's entire career is built around complex serials that make no →

HOLMES AGAIN

Is the game afoot for *Sherlock*?

"I'd love to do it again," says Steven Moffat, responding to rumblings of a revival for *Sherlock*, his hit update of Arthur Conan Doyle's immortal consulting detective. "Look, it's not a format that wears out. It's over a hundred years old and going strong, so why aren't we making more?"

The chatter intensified after *Sherlock* producer Sue Vertue recently stated that the show had a potential future. "Sue only said that because she was asked and suddenly it becomes an announcement about a film!" Moffat tells *SFX*. "There is no new news here. We're just fending off that question, as ever.

"We would happily do it again and I hope someday that we do. It seems perverse not to. You make enough shows in your lifetime that no one gives a flying one about, so it's nice to have one that people are passionate about. It's almost presumptuous, almost arrogant, not to do it again. But there are no hard plans, none at all."

So is it simply a case for waiting for the stars to align? "For everything to sort itself out. We actually do have an idea. The idea is basically go back and do it again – but slightly more specific than that..."

What would excite him creatively about returning to the Baker Street boys? "It would be nice to see them just a little bit older, because it was always very foregrounded in our version that they were younger, let alone the fact that they were updated.

"It'd be quite nice to see them at more of a Jeremy Brett and Edward Hardwicke age, a bit more Rathbone and Bruce. I think that would be lovely. Now we can see the more famously middle-aged version.

"There's an audience waiting for it. It seems madness not to do it."

COLIN HUTTON/HARTSWOOD FILMS

The Doctor in Arthur Dent mode, with Trev (Joel Fry).

concession to the fact that you haven't just watched the previous episode. They're expecting you to keep up and make notes, which is sort of new. TV shows treat themselves like big novels, which is a good way for them to go.

But even some lovely bit of nonsense like *Rivals*, it's a serial. And *Doctor Who* used to be a serial, back in the day. Alright, it was a series of serials, but nonetheless almost every single episode ended in a cliffhanger. When we brought it back we moved it to what was then the more current version of a different story every week.

What does it do now? Should it be more serialised again? That's the one I keep thinking about. It's not my business to think about these things and I should keep my trap shut, but I do keep thinking this is the show that does cliffhangers better than any other. Are we missing out on something here? I don't know what the answer is.

> **"The new show is ancient. We call it new but from next year it will be 20 years old"**

Are you confident *Doctor Who* will adapt to these challenges?

◆ It's the perfectly evolved predator and it hasn't evolved into its final form. It just carries on, and becomes yet again a modern television show. Yes, of course it will adapt. I have absolute confidence it will just carry on.

The new show is ancient. We call it the new show but from next year it will be 20 years old and there are already 19 years of "modern" *Doctor Who*, sitting there on iPlayer. That's another challenge that *Doctor Who* has, of course, which it never had before. The show has all of its past readily available on your iPhone, whenever you want it. It does seem ludicrous when modern *Doctor Who* sits there with all these shows and it looks like it has a bunch of megastars in it. You forget that Matt Smith wasn't a megastar when he became the Doctor!

In a bizarre way, *Doctor Who* competes with itself now – not just everything else on television but 19 years of, I would immodestly say, excellent *Doctor Who*, just sitting there. And if you're bored of that lot, you've got 26 years [of the classic series] on the shelf.

But if you're complaining about being the victim of your own enormous success, you could point to the words "enormous success". Other shows don't have this problem! ●

Doctor Who "Joy To The World" is on BBC One and iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally) on Christmas Day.

Crunchyroll

Your ticket to endless anime is here

Unlimited ad-free anime • Subs & dubs
New shows from Japan • Classic series
Offline viewing • Exclusive merch discounts
Mobile games • Music videos & concerts

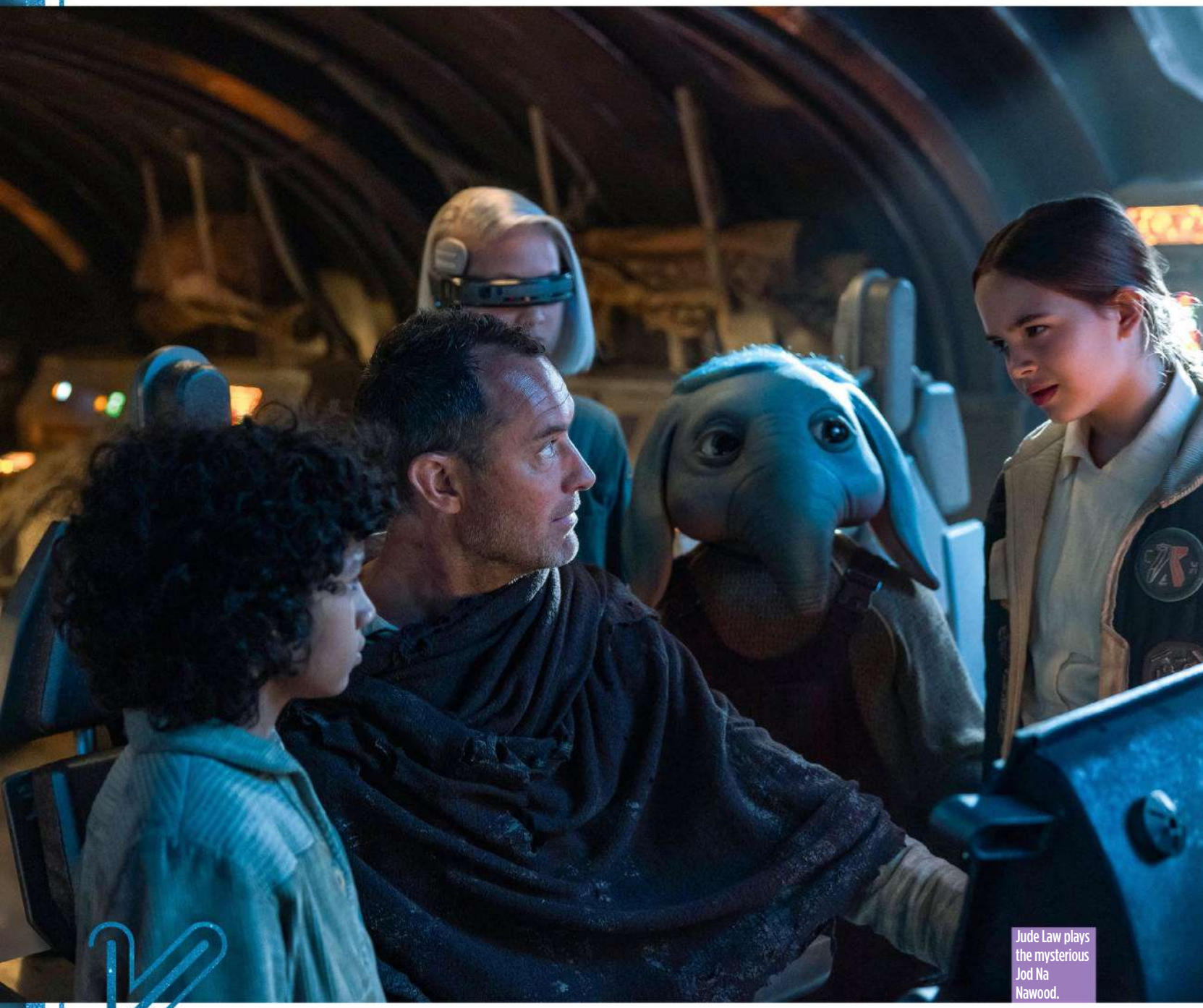
SCAN
TO START YOUR
7-DAY TRIAL

T&Cs apply, visit crunchyroll.com for more details

PIRATES! SUBURBIA! JUDE LAW! **SKELETON CREW** SHOWRUNNERS JON WATTS AND CHRISTOPHER FORD EXPLAIN WHY THEIR "GOONIES IN SPACE" STAR WARS SHOW ISN'T JUST FOR KIDS

WORDS:
RICHARD EDWARDS

DISNEY+, MATT KENNEDY. ©2024 LUCASFILM LTD. STOCK ELEMENTS: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY, ISTOCK



Jude Law plays the mysterious Jod Na Nawood.

KIDS IN FAR, FAR AWAY GALAXIES often have to grow up fast. Whether it's Qui-Gon Jinn anointing Anakin Skywalker as the Chosen One, or Obi-Wan Kenobi telling Luke he's the galaxy's last hope (no pressure), *Star Wars* tends to expect big things from its younglings.

In *Skeleton Crew* – Lucasfilm's latest Disney+ offering, and the first since *The Acolyte*'s cancellation – it's the turn of four 10-year-olds from a backwater planet to take on the whole universe by themselves. And in this case they're not so much taking their first steps into a larger world as making a full-on hyperspace jump into the unknown. "The pitch was always that it's the story of four kids who get lost in the *Star Wars* galaxy and have to find their way back home," explains *Skeleton Crew* co-creator/showrunner Jon Watts, who's perhaps best known for directing the MCU's *Spider-Man* trilogy.

"I first pitched it to Lucasfilm right after the first *Spider-Man*, so we've been working on it in some capacity since 2017. That was before *The Mandalorian* came out, so it started as a movie, but TV has allowed us a bigger canvas. Having eight episodes just opened up so many more possibilities."

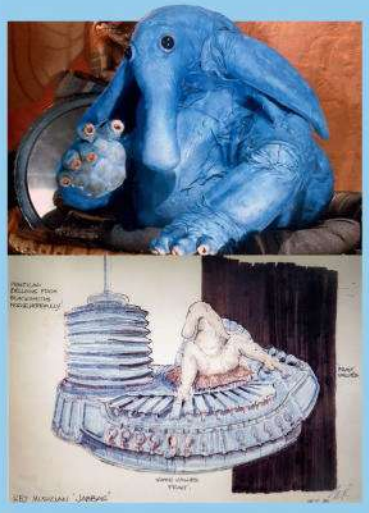
It's also an opportunity for Watts and long-time writing partner (and fellow *Skeleton Crew* creator/showrunner) Christopher Ford to indulge their affection for classic family movies from the '80s. Spearheaded by releases from Steven Spielberg's production company Amblin (now a byword for the subgenre), the likes of *ET*, *Explorers*, *Young Sherlock Holmes* and, of course, *The Goonies*, specialised in putting ordinary kids in extraordinary situations, prompting an entire generation to yearn for adventures of their own.

"*The Goonies* in space" has since become a convenient shorthand for

Meet the gang: KB, Neel, SM-33, Fern and Wim.

MAX FACTOR

Does Max Rebo have arms or not? Why *Skeleton Crew*'s Neel opens an elephantine can of worms



With his big ears, trunk and blue skin, *Skeleton Crew*'s Neel looks a lot like Max Rebo, the famous keyboard player from Jabba the Hutt's house band. Despite those similarities, however, it looks like Neel is not a member of the same Ortolan species as Rebo.

"We were super-inspired by Max Rebo and wanted an awesome alien buddy for our human boy," admits Christopher Ford. "But there were just things about his design [we wanted to change], like his eyes being a little bit too beady and lifeless. We wanted these big puppy dog eyes for Neel, to give him a little tuft of hair and, well, he does have arms."

Yes, the big giveaway is the fact that Neel has arms. And before you yell "So does Max!", it's clear from the original Rebo designs that he has just two limbs, and is effectively playing keys with his feet, while sitting on a cushion. Pretty much everyone – including Kenner, which released the Rebo action figure in 1984 – had assumed that Rebo had "two arms, two legs" humanoid form, but this was not supposed to be the case.

"The open-ended arms question is a fun part of *Star Wars* lore that I love diving into, that [guardian of *Star Wars* canon] Pablo Hidalgo has written essays about. Also, if you look around the galaxy, there's so many trunked species that are just different. It's like there's lots of near-human species, and there's many Pachydermoid species as well."

Skeleton Crew, though Watts and Ford admit they stopped short of pitching it that way to Lucasfilm boss Kathleen Kennedy – after all, she made her name producing many of Amblin's '80s classics with Spielberg.

"I think [*Goonies* in space] is a hard thing to say to Kathleen Kennedy!" laughs Ford. "'It's like *The Goonies* but now *we'll* do it!'"

"We grew up with those movies, so that's just in our DNA, I feel like they influence everything that I do," chips in Watts. "Kathleen had the most insightful description of Amblin films. She said that when they were making them, they never thought of them as kids' movies.

"They were grown-up movies that just happened to star kids, and that is the best way to think about what we're making here. *Skeleton Crew* should be able to stand alongside anything else in the *Star Wars* universe. It just happens to be told from the perspective of four 10-year-old kids."

That's surely something many *Star Wars* fans will relate to. Millions of us fell in love with George Lucas's universe precisely because it captured our imaginations when we were 10 (or thereabouts), and – despite the franchise's many ups and downs over the years – that romance has never diminished.

At its best, *Star Wars* can transport you away from the everyday world in a way few other franchises can. Escaping a humdrum existence is a major theme of *Skeleton Crew*, in which a quartet of unsuspecting space sprogs (Fern, KB, Neel and Wim) stumble on something buried in the woods, that – to riff on one of Watts's previous movies – takes them far from home.

"Our kids are even younger than Luke Skywalker was, even more naïve, and – spoiler alert – aren't super-powerful Jedi in the making," Ford explains. "These kids are very sheltered – they don't know they're living in a universe that's called *Star Wars*!"

> **"The pitch was always that it's the story of four kids who get lost in the Star Wars galaxy"**

Skeleton Crew is set in the same post-*Return Of The Jedi* time period as *The Mandalorian*, *The Book Of Boba Fett* and *Ahsoka*, and that's no accident. With the New Republic doing its best to govern while burying its head in the sand about the rise of those pesky Imperial remnants, it's the sort of quasi-anarchic environment where *Star Wars* tends to thrive.

"A reason we decided to set it then was because you don't have a big, powerful government like the Old Republic or the Empire to scoop them up if they're lost," says Ford. "It's a bit more of a lawless time, bringing →

At last it's time to hit the ol' hyperdrive. Whee!

© LUCASFILM LTD. JOHN BINGHAM / ALAMY

What's the story with Jod Na? You'll find out.

Neel (Robert Timothy Smith) and Wim (Ravi Cabot-Conyers).

> **It involved seeing hundreds of kids until someone walked in that embodied the role**

in aspects of the Old West – which is, I think, why [*Mandalorian/Ahsoka* overseers] Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni were attracted to it as a period for *The Mandalorian*. Also, pirates flourish when there's open seas."

Pirates? Yes, if there's an interstellar equivalent of shivering yer timbers, then *Skeleton Crew* is out to find it, as the spacefaring tweens are set to cross paths with villains of the piratical persuasion.

Pirate themes have been part of the *Star Wars* universe all the way back to the original trilogy – remember Luke Skywalker walking the plank? – while Gorian Shard's gang were a major threat in *The Mandalorian*'s third season. One of his lieutenants, Vane, will return in the new show.

"There's a fun thematic parallel between our kids and the pirate crew," Watts points out. "In a lot of ways, pirates are grown-up kids who don't want to follow rules and just want to go on their own way, arguing about who gets to be the captain.

"It was great to go back and watch old pirate serials as an influence, swashbuckling epics like *The Sea Hawk* [1940] and *Captain Blood* [1935]. Also, my other huge Lucasfilm fandom is the *Monkey Island* games. I loved all of the pirate things in those, and felt like we could bring a little hint of that to *Skeleton Crew*."

HEY YOU GUYS!

It turns out, however, that sailing into the unknown is nowhere as daunting as assembling a quartet of young actors to front a multi-million dollar TV show. Luckily, Watts was able to get a few tips from the director who recruited the Goonies for their legendary 1985 adventure.

"I got really great advice from Dick Donner," says Watts. "I got to hang out with him like a couple of weeks before he died [in 2021], and we talked about *The Goonies*. He said that you don't cast kids to play a role, you cast kids to just be who they are. He told the story about how they had a Goonies reunion, and said everyone was exactly the same as they were then – they formed into the same groups, they were telling versions of the same jokes and had the same dynamic as they did when they were kids.

"I kept that in mind when we were casting. You're looking for the person as much as you are for the actor to play the role. It just involved seeing hundreds of kids until someone walked in that felt like they embodied the role. Then we were able to write to their personalities and shift storylines a little bit, to allow them to put more of themselves into the roles. It was a really, really fun and rewarding process – but," he laughs, "definitely time consuming."

Grown-up support comes from Kerry Condon (*The Banshees Of Inisherin*, Tony Stark's AI FRIDAY in the MCU), and the Cornetto Trilogy's Nick Frost as a droid named SM-33 (note the Peter Pan connection in the name, similar to Captain Hook's boatswain Mr Smee). Then there's Jude Law as Jod Na Nawood, an unlikely companion who seems to possess Force-like abilities, yet carries a blaster and has something of the Han Solo about him. What's the deal?

"It's so hard to talk about Jude's character," says Ford, parrying our question like a lightsaber deflecting a laser blast. "It's not like we're trying to hide spoilers, but his character in the show is someone who's a bit of a mystery. That's not us, like, dodging it. That's us saying he is a mystery and the fun of figuring him out is a big part of the show."

Watts and Ford have been able to unleash the full might of Lucasfilm's mighty production arsenal on *Skeleton Crew*. They've filmed on Industrial Light & Magic's state-of-the-art virtual Volume, with John Knoll (the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, the *Pirates Of The*

A droid teacher and Fara (Kerry Condon).

AMBLIN AROUND

Jon Watts and Christopher Ford on their '80s coming-of-age favourites

WATTS: It's not an Amblin movie, but I love *Over The Edge* [actually released in 1979], with Matt Dillon. It's great because it's set basically where I grew up – it kind of looks like my hometown – and it's about a bunch of kids that lose their minds, take over the school and burn it down. It's not like the Amblin movies of awe and wonder. It's a much tougher version of that, but I love it.

I loved the movies that were going for Amblin but were kind of on the fringes, and the people making them didn't quite get it. *Cloak & Dagger* was another weird one. It's like Amblin but they give a kid a gun, and his imaginary friend is, like, "Kill that guy!" but he doesn't want to kill anybody.

I also loved *Explorers*. That's also not an Amblin movie but it feels like one. It's got that magic.

FORD: There were so many movies inspired by Amblin that didn't quite get the tone right, like *Mac And Me*. There weren't the same guardrails for what kids should be doing in the storylines. They were always putting kids in very genuine danger. I liked *The Manhattan Project*, where the kid is making a nuclear bomb. He's basically making it to show them [he can]!

MOVIESTORE/SHUTTERSTOCK

The droid SM-33 (left) is voiced by Nick Frost.

Caribbean movies) as their VFX supervisor. They've also employed old-school techniques such as matte paintings and stop-motion, and even worked with Phil Tippett, the animator behind the AT-ATs and the Rancor, to create a "sort of Ray Harryhausen creature".

So with all those creative forces combining, it's surprising to learn that one of their priorities was making the kids' homeworld feel a little, well, dull – proving, along the way, that suburbia is something of a universal constant.

"We thought that there must be some sort of middle class that exists in *Star Wars*," says Watts. "You usually only see the high and the low, but there has to be some version of what's essentially a boring planet.

"That's hard to do, because as soon as you make it *Star Wars* it's innately cool, but we needed the kids to be coming from a kind of boring, safe place. Then they're suddenly thrust into this much more chaotic and dangerous galaxy."

"[Their world] gives you the feeling that it's not just boring, it's sheltered," adds Ford. "It's kind of like a gated community, with the idea that you might leave Coruscant to live in the suburbs so that you're safe, but all that you're really doing is stifling [yourself]. It's a question of safety versus living your life."

Fern, KB, Neel and Wim may not be aware of the full geopolitical ramifications (yet), but they're living in an unsettled time for the galaxy as a whole.

Grand Admiral Thrawn is poised to unite the remains of the Empire, and numerous plot threads are building up to a "climactic event" movie tying together *The Mandalorian*, *Ahsoka* and *The Book Of Boba Fett*.

Watts and Ford assure us, however, that you don't need to do any particular revision before tuning into *Skeleton Crew*. "We wanted to make sure that you could watch and appreciate the story we were telling – and understand what was happening – without having to do any homework," says Watts.

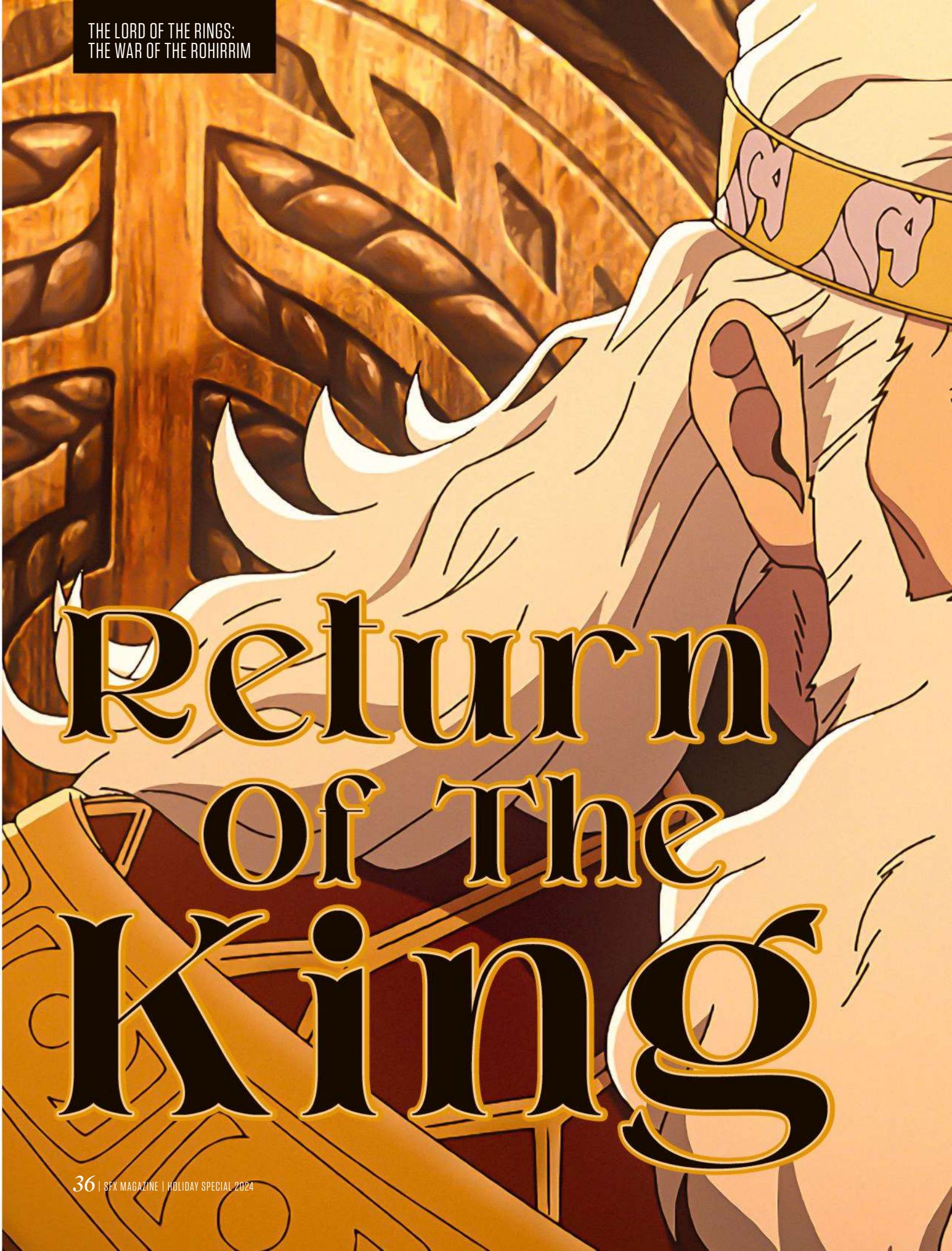
"But if you do know *Star Wars*, there's lots of layers that you can appreciate, and it gives you a different perspective on what the kids are going through. These kids have never really seen the universe in this way, so they're lost in the galaxy experiencing *Star Wars* for the first time. That works for the viewers as well."

And, by the sound of things, for the big kids – sorry, crew – working behind the camera, too. "Every day it felt like there was some new magical thing that was happening on set," recalls Ford, "whether it was a new animatronic or a hand puppet."

"There's one little ship that we have in the show, kind of like a little space dinghy," adds Watts. "We rigged it up so that a joystick would move the ship on a gimbal, so that you could fly it and the Volume would rotate based on where you were steering. It was like the most expensive immersive videogame ever.

"Everyone on the crew just wanted to take a turn – the boom operator wanted to go in and fly around for a little bit." If you're going to put the fate of the universe in the hands of a bunch of kids, you might as well have fun doing it.

Skeleton Crew is on Disney+ from 3 December.



Return of The King

THE TEAM BEHIND
THE LORD OF THE RINGS
TRILOGY ARE BACK IN MIDDLE-EARTH, PRODUCING A NEW ANIME INSTALMENT,
THE WAR OF THE ROHIRRIM.
***SFX* MEETS PRODUCER PHILIPPA BOYENS TO TALK ALL THINGS ROHAN**

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

THE ROHIRRIM HAVE BEEN beaten back into Helm's Deep's keep by Saruman's Uruk-hai. Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas are trapped and Gandalf the White has yet to appear. All seems lost. But then, as day breaks, King Théodon readies his men for another charge. "The Horn of Helm Hammerhand will sound in the deep, one last time," he tells them.

Wait. Hold on a second. The Horn of Helm Who? For those who haven't read *The Lord Of The Rings*' lengthy appendices, Hammerhand is one of JRR Tolkien's most famous (non-trilogy) Middle-earth characters.

He was the ninth King of Rohan, having lived over 180 years before Frodo threw a ring into Mount Doom, and is best known for fighting off the wild Dunlendings with his bare hands.

Now, Helm's at the centre of an anime movie, *The War Of The Rohirrim*, directed by Kenji Kamiyama (*Blade Runner: Black Lotus*, various *Ghost In The Shell* series) and produced by Philippa Boyens, who co-wrote the cinematic adaptations of *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, *The Two Towers* and *The Return Of The King* with Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh.

"The idea of an animated *Lord Of The Rings* movie had been floating around for a while, and we had thought about various ideas," Boyens tells *SFX*. "Pete [who serves as an executive producer on *Rohirrim*] had more of a sense of what it could be than I did.

"I was always a little bit sceptical. It wasn't until Warner Bros came to us and said, 'What about an anime film?' that I felt, 'Yes, an anime film could absolutely work in Middle-earth.' The story of Helm immediately came to mind as soon as they said anime."

FIST FORWARD

It makes complete sense to adapt the story of Helm. He is, after all, not only the namesake of Helm's Deep's horn, but the entire stronghold. His men called him Hammerhand thanks to the sheer power of his fists; he was known to go into battle without any other weapon. But considering the sheer depth of Tolkien's work, it's a surprise that Helm's story was the one that came so quickly to Boyens.

"One of the reasons why I kept getting stuck on what our foray back into the world of Middle-earth could be was that we didn't want it to involve Dark Lords or rings, and that it could be a self-contained story, that it wouldn't necessarily involve characters that we already knew, that this could revolve around a whole fresh set of characters," she explains.

"I felt it needed to be a story that could stand alone in the form of animation – and I always loved the Rohirrim as a people, I found them fascinating."

Helm's story ticked those boxes and, more importantly, it featured drama and action that would suit animation. However, as much as Helm himself is important, this is the tale of his family, and the war and wreckage that followed a failed arranged marriage between his daughter Héra and Wulf, the son of Freca, lord of the Dunlending, a race of men who were bitter foes of the Rohirrim.

"It felt like a story that would fit well within the tradition of great Japanese cinematic storytelling," Boyens says. "Not just themes of honour, but of family, and that sense that even our heroes have quite significant flaws, in the case of Helm Hammerhand."

When work began on the film, Boyens found herself surprised by just how well the medium of anime suited the Middle-earth aesthetic. "Pete and Fran [also an executive producer], when they saw the very first cut of the film, were struck by how easily you fall back into the world of Middle-earth," Boyens says. "That has a lot to do with the performances from our cast, but also how the landscapes of the film are recognisable. Edoras, the Hornburg, all of those environments are there.

"It's down to the artistry of Kenji Kamiyama, the way in which he uses those images and how he moves through the world. It's his camera, his approach to storytelling. That's exactly the way Peter wanted it.

"He was very determined to take a step back and allow Kenji to find his own way through it. I think Pete's really enjoyed that process and has come to appreciate what another director has brought to that world."

TOLKIEN LIBERTIES

Unlike when Jackson and Boyens adapted the main *Lord Of The Rings* trilogy, *Rohirrim* is based on more minor source material. In fact, in Tolkien's writings, despite Helm's daughter playing a major part in why battle erupts between the Rohirrim and Dunlending, she does not have a canonical name. So Boyens had to create one, Héra, and gave her a prominent role in the story.

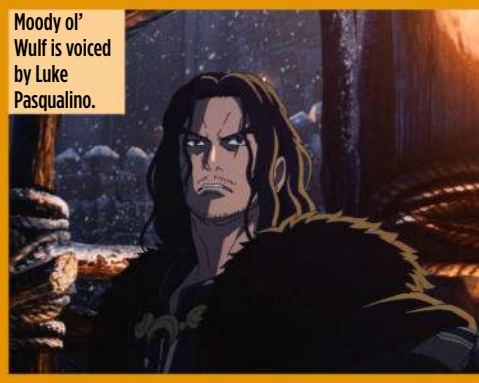
"We always come at any adaptation from a place of respect," she says. "I know some fans won't believe this, but we don't change things lightly. This is my seventh Tolkien film. What I've come to understand is that the story can't be immutable. Adaptation can only be informed by the original text.

"That's not coming from a place of arrogance. It's just coming from a place that, yes, we did have to create a story. Whether or not it was the intention of what Professor Tolkien would have done is beside the point, because it's part of a tale that he left untold. But once you look at the threads of the story that are in the books, you find that actually there was a huge amount of story revolving around that unnamed daughter.

"So we were always drawing on sources. I would hope Professor Tolkien would have approved of, for example, drawing upon his →

Wulf and Héra square off after Monopoly.

Héra, Helm Hammerhand and Haleth. Heck.



Moody ol' Wulf is voiced by Luke Pasqualino.

PICTURES © WARNER BROS. ANIMATION. STOCK ELEMENTS: SEAMARTINI, GREENGRAPHY/GETTY

"Can I have a lift?" "Hmm... This could set a precedent."

A New Hero

Gaia Wise, the voice behind *Rohirrim*'s new protagonist, talks becoming Héra

What made you fall in love with Héra?
Everything about her! Her tenacity. Her character arc is so wonderful, and it's unlike the other female characters in the original films, who already feel like fully fledged women. Helm calls her a tearaway child, and she's just wild and free, loves being outdoors. Then she's greeted with the most horrific thing that could ever happen to a person and she chooses to find the love and care within her to not go on the attack. She chooses to defend her people in an incredibly wholesome way. She's fallible and she's scared, but she's tenacious.

What's your history with *The Lord Of The Rings*?
I read *The Hobbit* as a child, and loved it, and then tried *The Silmarillion* and I went, "What the hell is going on?" I tried it again as a teenager, and I thought, "This is amazing." When the films came out, and I was able to piece together the book and the films, it was an easier read. I love that this came from one insanely creative man's head. I watch the films at least two or three times a year, I do the trilogy – the extended versions.

Were you surprised that you had such a central role in the movie, considering that Helm Hammerhand is such an imposing character in Tolkien's work?
Helm's such a huge part of the film. He's a huge part of the reason Héra can be so courageous and tenacious. He's behind her all the way. At first, he slightly pushes her: "You're the princess, you're going to go off and marry."

Then, of course, suddenly he realises how powerful she is, and how much of an asset and an ally she is. I was happily surprised by how she's the first leading female kick-ass hero that *The Lord Of The Rings* has had, where it's following her storyline. Within that, you have her brothers, and Wulf, and Helm, these fantastic male protagonists as well. But I love that you have a really powerful new hero in her.

Which other character does she best compare to?
She's sort of not comparable, but I suppose if she was, it would be Éowyn. She's kick-ass, and she's there going, "You have to let me fight!" and then she slays the Witch King. But Héra's arc is much quicker and much more brutal than Éowyn's.

She's a character with little history in Tolkien's writing. Was it fun to create something new?
I had dialect coaching, with this wonderful woman called Roisin [Carty], who had done all the original films as well. I had to pronounce things correctly. We went through the script meticulously. But I really was given free rein otherwise. It was so useful having Philippa in the room because she is the Tolkien queen, and so if there was ever a moment that I needed not just backstory, or if I couldn't quite get something in the recording booth, I could turn to her and she would give me something. Having people who have been part of this franchise since the very beginning was incredibly useful. But they were also incredible at letting me go for it.

What was working with Kenji like?
He's incredible. It was a really interesting experience because towards the end, we just got each other so well that he would make a noise that he wanted me to make, and I would be like, "I got you." He can't really speak English, so he had this wonderful translator. If I did something, Kenji would either

Héra (voiced by Gaia Wise) aboard her steed.

go [Wise puts her thumbs up, then down], then I'd try something new. He was so instrumental to me relaxing into the character, because it's not something I've ever done before, an anime, and he is such a huge anime director.

He knows the sounds he needs and where the exclamations are needed to make the art pop. There would be moments when I would get the script, and it was just like, "Scream noises" and I was like, "What do you mean?" He would do it, and I would make the noise. That was really lovely and very funny. He made me not worry about looking like a fool.

What are you most excited for people to see?

I'm really excited for them to meet Héra and to introduce such a powerful character. I'm really excited for the world of Rohan and the riders to come back to the big screen. There are so many Easter eggs for fans.

They really made sure to put them in and ground the film in the world. I just hope that people enjoy the final process as much as I enjoyed working on it.

heroine Éowyn, the lady of Rohan. Then we also reached into Anglo-Saxon history, drawing upon some of the incredibly strong women who have had to face very similar situations, particularly Æthelflæd, daughter of Alfred the Great, who ended up leading her people once her father died and her husband passed."

Boyens goes on to describe Rohirrim as an ensemble piece with a "father-daughter story" at its centre and Héra at its heart – the same way "Frodo stands at the heart of *Lord Of The Rings*". Within the ensemble, Helm is a towering figure, made more imposing thanks to *Succession* actor Brian Cox's voice.

Then there's Wulf (*Skins*' Luke Pasqualino), Héra's would-be husband, who leads his people into battle. "He becomes Héra's mortal enemy, but this is an enemy she once called friend," Boyens says.

After Héra refuses Wulf's hand in marriage, Wulf – not content with just ruling the Dunlendings – challenges Helm for the throne of Rohan. "He is not without cause when he challenges Helm," Boyens continues. "He could have ruled [his people] in a righteous manner, as opposed to someone who takes the path of a tyrant. He could have perhaps become a king in his own right, a genuinely good king.

"He might have set Rohan on a different path. But he doesn't. He makes a very fatal choice and does something so aberrant that he cannot go back. He cannot step away from that choice he made, and there's only one way forward – he has to destroy them all. It's a little bit intense and a little bit dark."

While Helm, Héra and Wulf may be unfamiliar to many Tolkien fans, there is one familiar face returning for the film: Éowyn, slayer of the Witch King, played by Miranda Otto in Jackson's trilogy. The actor is returning to the role, with Éowyn acting as the story's narrator. Bringing Otto back was quite the experience for Boyens.

"I got chills," she says. "When she stepped into the studio, she looked at me and said, 'Phil, it might take me a while to find her.' We started and it took her five minutes. She was back, and

> **"I've fallen back in love with the whole story and the world, and especially with Tolkien's mind"**

that was Éowyn. I love the narration. It's a passionate narration, full of colour. You can really feel her presence in the story."

Boyens stresses that Otto's returning presence, plus the sharing of a few locations between the anime and the original movies, helps anyone feel like they are back in Middle-earth. "At some point, you go, 'Wait, I know this world!'" Boyens says. "It's a good thing, especially for Tolkien fans, but then at the same time it's its own story. Like, we've seen Edoras, but we haven't seen Edoras in flames before."

The War Of The Rohirrim is just the beginning of Boyens's trip back to Tolkien's world. While there's the ongoing *Rings Of Power* series, Boyens, Jackson, and Walsh are not affiliated with the show. However, the trio are producing the upcoming live-action movie *The Hunt For Gollum*, helmed by Andy Serkis.

"That is incredibly exciting," Boyens says. "*Rohirrim* was us testing the waters for ourselves. Can we go back to Middle-earth? Should we go back? And it's been a joy to go back. I've fallen back in love with the whole story and the world, and especially with Professor Tolkien's mind and the way he thinks, which I've rediscovered all over again.

"He didn't just write books. He wrote an entire mythos. So his work can hold a lot. This is just another contribution to that world he created. In the end, it's up to the audience – as long as people want to engage with that world, there's going to be dramatic works put out there." It sounds like the Horn of Helm Hammerhand could sound in the deep a few more times.

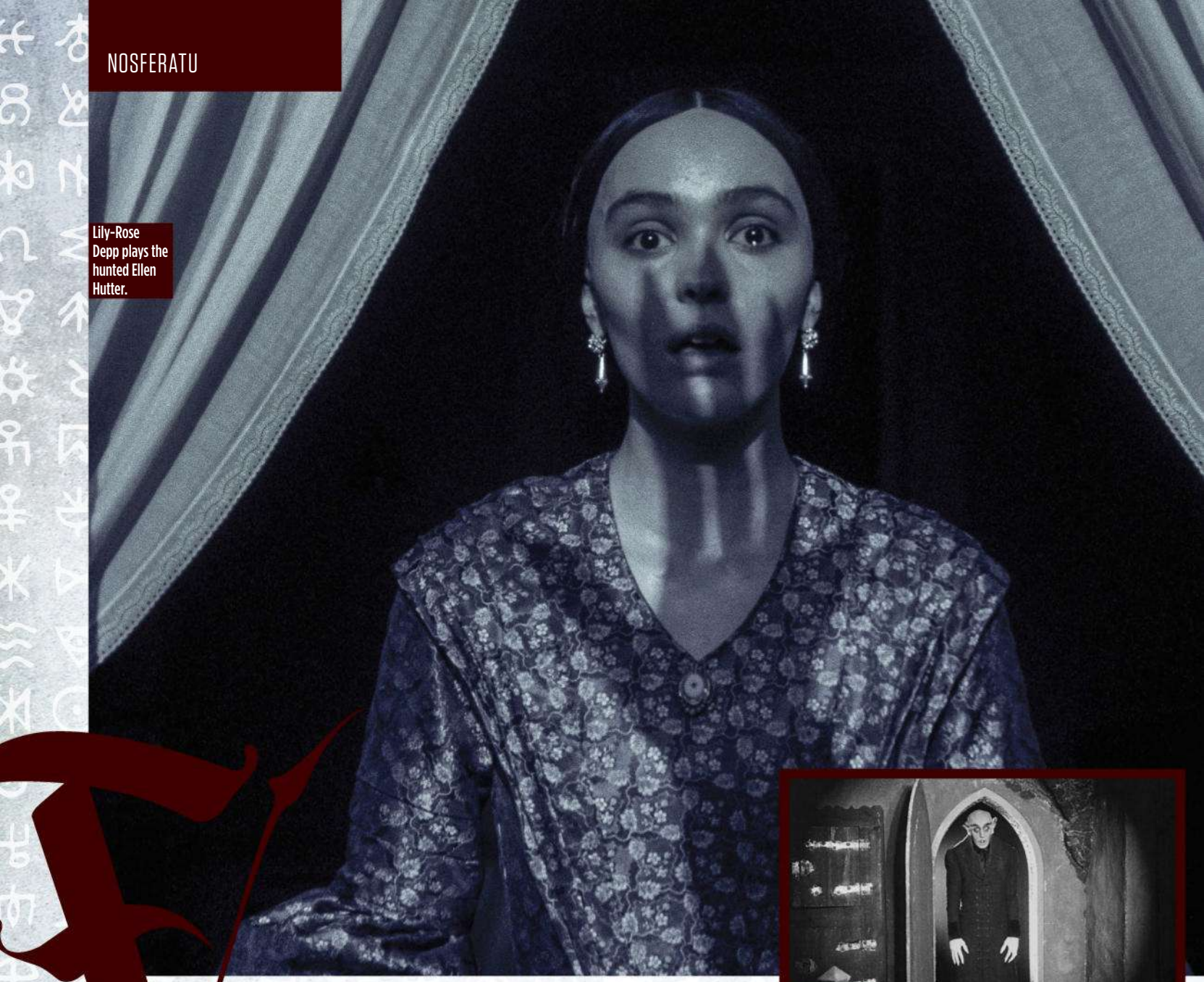
The Lord Of The Rings: The War Of The Rohirrim is in cinemas from 13 December.

"Coming through... sorry... excuse me..."

OVER A CENTURY SINCE HE MADE HIS DEBUT, COUNT ORLOK IS CREEPING BACK INTO CINEMAS IN A NEW VERSION OF NOSFERATU. WE SPEAK TO DIRECTOR ROBERT EGGERS

Fool Attion

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**



Lily-Rose Depp plays the hunted Ellen Hutter.

VAMPIRES NEVER REALLY die, as anyone who's seen a few Hammer horrors will know. No matter what happens to Dracula – scorched by sunlight, impaled on a cross, struck by lightning – he always ends up coming back.

It seems the same is true of his German counterpart, Count Orlok, who's about to be resurrected for a 21st century audience by Robert Eggers, director of critically lauded period pieces *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse* and *The Northman*.

The bond between these two vampires is more than a matter of blood. FW Murnau's 1922 silent classic was the first film to adapt Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, but did so without authorisation, metaphorically filing off the serial numbers. Its plot is essentially that of Stoker's story, with events transplanted to 1838 Germany and names changed to protect, er, the copyright infringers: Dracula became Orlok; hapless solicitor Jonathan Harker became Thomas Hutter; his wife Lucy became Ellen. Not that such transparent subterfuge made a scrap of difference. Stoker's widow Florence sued, won ownership of the film, and then ordered every copy to be destroyed. Thankfully, several different incomplete prints escaped the purge.

Murnau's vampire is far removed from both the figure described by Stoker, with his "heavy moustache" and "broad, strong" chin, and the version later embodied by Christopher Lee. German actor Max Schreck donned a bald cap, a beaky nose, pointed ears that would make Mr Spock blush, along with rat-like protruding teeth and fingernails like talons. Orlok is, without question, a monster.

Robert Eggers has existed under the character's malignant shadow for over 30 years now, first captivated by this horror icon as a boy. "When I was maybe nine or so, I was in the school library, looking at a book about vampires, and there was a picture of Max Schreck standing in the Gothic arch of Hutter's guest chamber in the castle," the director tells *SFX*. "I thought, 'That's the coolest thing I've ever seen in my life, and I need to see this movie.'"

The young Eggers quickly enlisted the help of his mother. "We went to the local store where you could buy movies, and we had to order it," he recalls. "It came in the mail, this VHS of *Nosferatu*. I don't remember this, but

Max Schreck in FW Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*.

EVERETT/SHUTTERSTOCK

Willem Dafoe as Albin Eberhart Von Franz.

PICTURES: AIDAN MONAGHAN/FOCUS FEATURES

Director Robert Eggers (left) calls the shots.

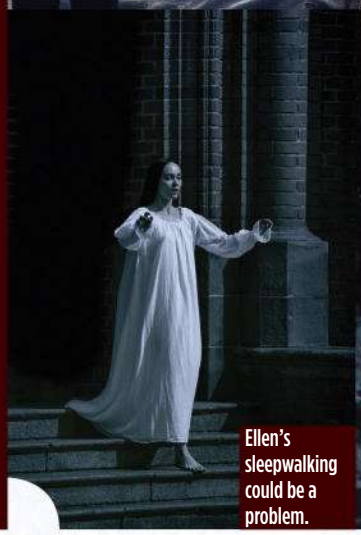
WEE BEASTIES

The perils of rodent wrangling

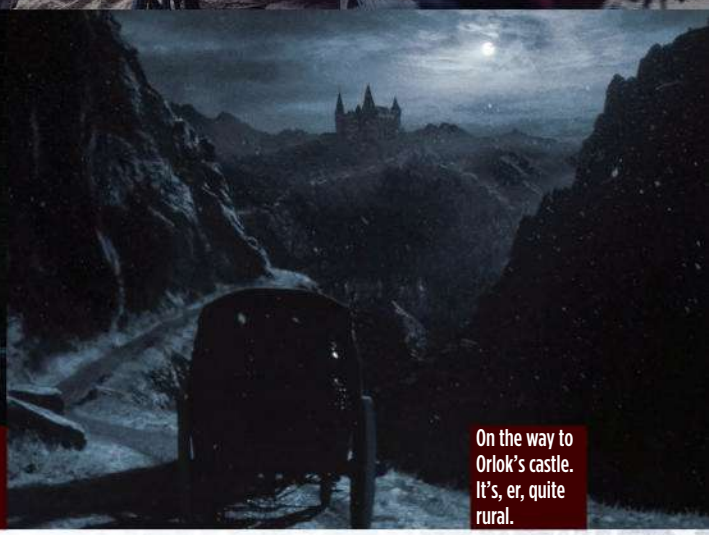
Nosferatu features several sequences involving the rats who accompany Orlok – sometimes in great swarms. And you know what they say about working with animals... "The animal trainers in Prague are amazing," Eggers says. "We were working with Ota Bareš and his people. He's the guy who trained the fox to say 'Chaos reigns' [in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*]."

"Where there's a more limited number of rats, the rats were trained – they did some stuff on cue, which was pretty spectacular. And when you have thousands of rats we had Plexiglas barricades set up.

"But the biggest challenge is that the smell is horrific. I was ignorant of the fact that rats are incontinent, so they're constantly pissing and shitting, like, *all the time*. And that goes for the scene where they're on Emma Corrin [Ellen's friend Anna] – that was a challenge for them!"



Ellen's sleepwalking could be a problem.



On the way to Orlok's castle. It's, er, quite rural.

I looked up the version my mom purchased, and it didn't have a soundtrack at all. I think that had it had a cheesy organ score, I might have not had the same affection for the movie. The atmosphere of the film really stuck with me, and Schreck's performance."

The patchy *Nosferatu* releases in circulation back then, in the early '90s, were no match for the pristine Blu-ray editions you can purchase today – which Eggers thinks partly explains why the film made such a powerful impression.

"I really enjoy watching the restored versions that have the colour tinting, and are very beautiful and detailed," he says. "But the version I had was made from a crappy 16mm print and had a lot of mystery to it. It almost felt real... almost like found footage. Versions like that, where you can't see the bald cap and the make-up, led to the idea that Max Schreck was actually a vampire. When you see the restored versions, it's very clear that's a guy with a ton of make-up, but in the version I saw as a kid it was more mysterious."

> **"As vampires evolved through the 20th century, they became more and more heroic"**

In addition, Eggers prefers his vampires to be old-school brutes – not the somewhat sanitised figures they later became. "Dracula in the novel is a real psycho," Eggers laughs, "a real bastard! As vampires evolved through the 20th century, they became more and more heroic and romantic. Even in the Coppola version [1992's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*], he's the romantic hero, really. Schreck's has this more elemental quality to him. And the movie, in its simplification of the story, is more of a fairy tale, which is also cool."

All this explains why Eggers is still under Orlok's thrall – and why an adaptation of *Nosferatu* was first announced back in 2015, as the follow-up to his debut *The Witch*. Things didn't quite work out like that. On the plus side, it's given him more time for the research deep dives we've come to expect from the director, who's renowned for his passion for getting the details right.

"I wanted to understand the intentions of the original filmmakers, to amplify my knowledge," Eggers says. "The production designer and producer of the film, Albin Grau, was an occultist – I think he believed in psychic vampires, anyway. So I was trying to think about what he was reading and learning about."

The Murnau film's Van Helsing analogue is a Professor Bulwer, whose role is pretty minimal →

Nicholas Hoult and Aaron Taylor-Johnson.

ROB THE BUILDER

Let's talk about sets

Eggers is keen to big up production designer Craig Lathrop, with whom he also collaborated on *The Witch*, *The Lighthouse* and *The Northman*. "I think he's so talented, and his team was so talented, that he's not going to get enough credit because people are going to think we were in locations."

While the production did visit some real-life castles – including Corvin Castle in Romania, also used in Werner Herzog's 1979 film (see page 50) – nearly everything else was built at Prague's Barrandov Studios, both to allow Eggers's cameras to roam, and for the purposes of architectural specificity.

"The town of Wisborg was something that we built," the director explains. "We scouted many northern German cities, and Polish cities that were part of Germany in this period, and built it based on that. And where there is some CG extension, we were doing digital scans of the buildings from these towns.

"Similarly, we shot a little bit in Transylvania, but we built the Transylvanian village in the Czech Republic. Florin Lăzărescu, who's most known in the West for being the screenwriter of the film *Aferim!*, was our Romania expert, and he said that when he visited the Transylvanian village set it conjured up memories from his childhood that he hadn't remembered."

His eventual Airbnb review was not glowing.

– his most memorable moment involves demonstrating how Venus flytraps feed to his students. ("We have a similar scene with a leech that will be on the Blu-ray," Eggers reveals.) Eggers's "more active" vampire expert is Professor Albin Eberhart Von Franz (note the nod to Grau's forename), played with gravitas by Willem Dafoe, who's called in after Ellen Hutter (Lily-Rose Depp), wife of Thomas (Nicholas Hoult), starts to sleepwalk and suffer strange fits.

"He's a medical doctor, and has views about hysteria and somnambulism which intersect with the occult in this period. So I was looking at how educated occultists were interpreting the folklore – what would he be believing in the 1830s?"

But it was the folklore itself which was "closest to my heart", Eggers stresses. "What would a dead Transylvanian nobleman look like? What would he dress like? What would his hairstyle be? How would he speak? The folk vampire became the guiding principle for the look of my Orlok."

That look is being kept tightly under wraps, with only the shadows cast by the Count featuring in promotional materials. From those, you'll divine that he hasn't started frequenting a nail bar... In the film, Orlok – played by Bill Skarsgård, whose catwalk-suitable good looks are even less recognisable than they were when he played Pennywise in *It* – takes a while to fully emerge from the shadows. We won't spoil the surprise; suffice it to say that his appearance is quite different. Given the OG Orlok's cameos in the likes of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, perhaps that's a good thing... Would a modern audience still shudder, or have to stifle the giggles?

Still, it's always a risk to discard an iconic look, *SFX* observes. "I felt like: Max Schreck did Max Schreck; why are we doing this again to just do Max Schreck again? I don't understand the point of it," Eggers reasons.

"Also, there are things about Max Schreck that make him a *creature*, and Orlok is a dead person and not a creature. So I was just following the approach of quote unquote authenticity that I'm always going for.

"While he has an unconventional hairstyle compared to what we think of," he continues, "that's based on noblemen from his period – which is an earlier period from the film, because he was alive in the 1500s. But the shape of his skull is based on Max Schreck. The shape of the nose is different, but it's in the same league.

"Vampires have long fingernails because their nails are said to grow in the grave; we know that's not scientifically true, but it's more the kind of fingernail length that we associate with the *Nosferatu* look. So there are things I'm doing to acknowledge where he came from, but I'm also trying to do things differently."

One area where he could begin with a blank page was Orlok's voice. Expect to feel your colon vibrating if you watch *Nosferatu* in a cinema with a decent Dolby system, because

Nicholas Hoult and Robert Eggers wrap up warm.

STOCK IMAGES: PASEVEN, KATSUMI MUROUCHI/GETTY

Thomas and Ellen, pictured in happier times.

Kids! This is what too much screen time does.

Professor Albin Eberhart von Franz on a night out.

> **“Vampires are all about sex and death, and the closeness of the two things at times”**

Skarsgård’s take makes Barry White sound like Joe Pasquale. You’d be forgiven for wondering if it’s a creation of the sound department.

“That’s Bill, not effects,” clarifies Eggers. “The voice that he created is very much the voice I had in my imagination. We wanted it as deep as possible, and he worked with an opera coach to deepen his voice.

“We talked about having this kind of hunch that was also a bit based on Max Schreck,” the director continues, addressing Orlok’s physicality. “That was built into the make-up. He also wore a piece under his cloak when he didn’t have that.” The director also provided the actor with books, and footage of filmic references. “I also sent him a backstory of Orlok that I wrote. So we came to it together to achieve what I was after.”

Skarsgård’s most important contribution was a touch of pathos. “Because I’m so tired of the heroic and sad vampires, I was just like, ‘He’s a demon. He’s so evil.’ But Bill was like, ‘Yeah, but there needs to be *some* times where he has some kind of vulnerability.’

“It’s very subtle, and it’s not there often, but it is enough. I think the ending of the movie is much more effective than it would have been without Bill’s acute sensitivity to that – while still delivering on this big, scary, masculine vampire.”

Masculine and, in a deeply perverse way, magnetic... Audiences may be surprised by how much a sexual element is to the fore, especially when it comes to the connection between Orlok and Ellen. It’s a powerful one, which long predates Orlok’s decision to relocate to the Hutters’ home town Wisborg, and its consummation seems predestined. Despite all her better instincts, there’s a physical yearning for the Count on Ellen’s part.

“I think it’s there in the silent film,” Eggers argues. “It’s just not as overt. But vampires are all about sex and death, and the closeness of the two things at times. The archetypal relationship between Ellen and Orlok is a demon lover relationship. Orlok doesn’t love her, but is obsessed with her and wants to destroy her, and they have this twisted, toxic relationship with lust and obsession, but the absence of love.”

It comes back to that folklore, in which – yet to acquire the romantic associations which have accumulated around it in the last century or so – the vampire is a more monstrous, feral figure. “One of the interesting things about doing the research is to try to forget everything you know about vampires,” Eggers says.

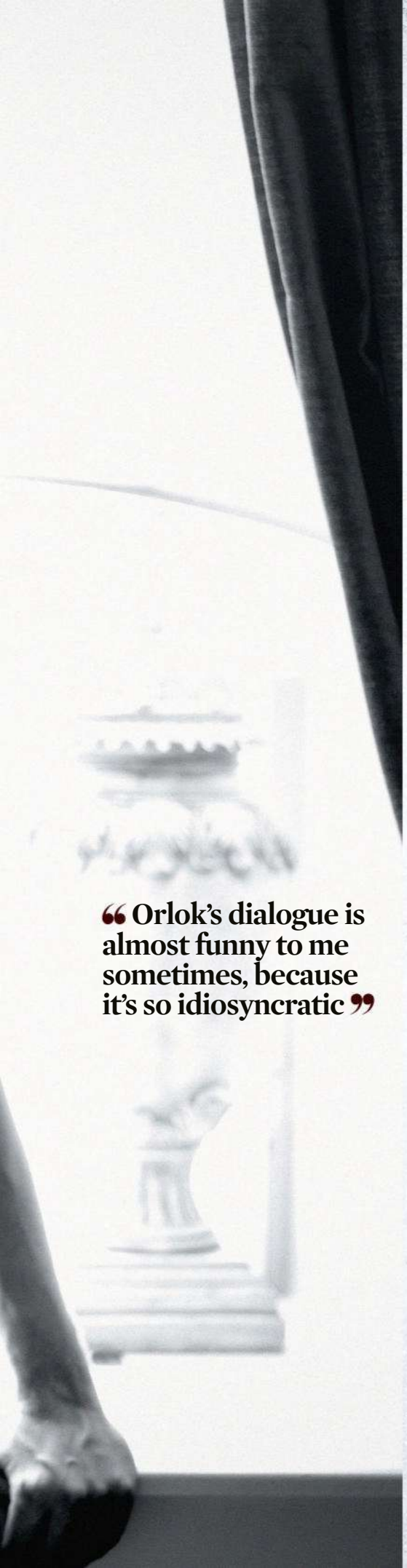
“You’ll notice that [in this film] Orlok drinks blood from the heart, not the neck. Now obviously you can’t pierce a breastbone, so it doesn’t really make sense. It makes much more sense to drink someone’s blood from their neck.

“But in the folklore, when people are experiencing vampiric attacks it’s similar to old hag syndrome [a colloquial term for sleep paralysis] where you have pressure on your chest, so people interpreted it as vampires drinking blood from their chest.

“But there are also folk vampires who didn’t drink blood, but just fornicated with their widows until their widows died from it,” Eggers adds. “So I think it’s all part of the source material...”

When it comes to the general look of Eggers’s film, don’t expect it to ape German expressionism, or to be replete with winking homages to the Murnau movie – not even its most famous sequence, in which the vampire creeps up the stairs towards Ellen’s bedroom, *Continued on page 50...*

“What’s in the boooox?” They’re about to find out...



Appetite for Destruction

Bill Skarsgård quits his coffin to talk about bringing Count Orlok to (undead) life

How did you find the right voice for Orlok?
Robert [Eggers] wanted it as deep as possible. We were looking at chain-smoking Bulgarian actors, stuff like that – or Ralph Ineson, who's in the movie, which is pretty much as low as the voice can humanly go! I didn't want it to feel contrived. I wanted it to feel otherworldly and fucked up and unsettling.

Robert writes beautiful descriptions. As an actor, you feel very fortunate working with such a script, because it's almost like working off a novel. You have these descriptions that are so visceral: the pained, laboured breath of Orlok. Even with speaking, there's an element of pain in it – it almost hurts him to speak. All those little things were building blocks for the development of the voice.

> "Orlok's dialogue is almost funny to me sometimes, because it's so idiosyncratic"

How rigorous were you about sounding authentically like a man from the Carpathians in the 1830s?
Well, in terms of the dialect, he wouldn't speak like a Romanian in the 19th century, because he was alive in 16th century Romania. And the dialogue, when he speaks in a foreign language, is Dacian, which is an extinct language. So it's not accurate.

Robert worked with linguists, and it's a recreation as close as it can be to that language. But he was like, "This doesn't have to be specific", which gave me the freedom of finding things that I thought were good – rolling the Rs and stuff like that. Then it's like, "Should we go with the V sound on the Ws?" And "Okay, then it gets more and more into Bela Lugosi territory." So we went back and forth with it.

This is someone that, when you meet him in the movie, probably hasn't spoken in a very long time, and has probably learned English – though it's actually German – from reading novels. So his dialogue is almost funny to me sometimes, because it's so idiosyncratic. He speaks like someone that doesn't fluently speak English, but has read a lot of books and constructed his way of talking from that.

Did you see the character as having a metaphorical meaning?
That became clear for me right before we were shooting it. I was like, "What's the function of Orlok in this story?" To me, it is Ellen's story. She's torn between a benevolent, loving husband and being inexplicably drawn towards this destruction. She seeks it out and allows herself to be destroyed by it. That kind of force can be anything. It could be a destructive relationship. It could be drugs. It could be whatever destructive force some people are drawn towards for one reason or another. That was helpful for me. Because it is a story, but it's also a metaphor for something bigger. And the psychology behind the thing was a deep well to dive into.

The film has a strong sexual undercurrent...
That was also all over the script. The first time I read it was eight or nine years ago, and I remember going, "Okay, hell yeah!" The sexual undercurrent of this iconic gothic fiction makes it so much more interesting, I think, and compelling.

In a lot of ways, what the movie is trying to do is bring vampires back to something genuinely terrifying, because we've gone too far away into the allure of the good-looking, charming vampire. In this version, it's sexual with Ellen *and* it's sexual with Thomas [Nicholas Hoult]. When Thomas is trapped in Orlok's castle he is very much being abused by him, and for Orlok that is as close to a good time as he can possibly have.

Many of the scenes are lit by candlelight. Did that make any difference for you?
It would get very hot! Especially with the giant fur coat, and on top of that the prosthetics. But it was kind of amazing. For all of my interiors of the castle, there was only candlelighting. But it's 60 candles right next to the camera.

Jarin, our DP, would run in and just put out two candles to lower the lighting, or light a few more. It was wonderful to watch, because it's the most analogue way of lighting humanly possible. So apart from it being really hot, it was quite exciting. And helpful as well, to get into the space when you were shooting.

After *Nosferatu* wrapped you played Pennywise again for prequel show *It: Welcome To Derry*. How was that?
It was strange to be back. [Producers] Andy and Barbara Muschietti were doing the show, and I adore them. Most of the crew was the same people that did the movies. So it was this weird thing of going back to this gang of people that you created this thing with.

I don't know why, but Pennywise is very accessible for me. So in terms of getting back into it, it was just like "Da da dah!", and he explodes out. He's so defined, he's sort of dormant but very easily activated. We explored things that we haven't explored in the movies – particularly one side of it, which I can't go into. I hope the fans are excited.

IBL/SHUTTERSTOCK

casting a shadow on the wall. "I've seen the Murnau film a billion times, and Jarin [Blaschke, director of photography] has seen it plenty, but we both adamantly did not want to recreate any shots," Eggers says. "There are some things that are a little similar, because it's just how it is. But there's nothing that is a replica. And when we could deviate from Murnau and tell the best story, we did."

FREDDIE'S NIGHTMARES

Instead, Eggers and his DOP had other reference points – some of them British. "A lot of classic gothic horror movies like *The Innocents* [1961] and *The Queen Of Spades* [1949] were very influential," he reveals. "*The Innocents* was shot by Freddie Francis, who was most famous for *The Elephant Man*, but he also directed a ton of Hammer horror films.

"Because a lot of the time he was working on low-budget films that didn't have time for a lot of setups, he would create these long oners [continuous takes] to check off a lot of shots. Sometimes it feels like that, but generally they're quite elegant. That kind of staging from '60s, '50s and '40s movies was very appealing."

Another, less widely appreciated figure whom Eggers namechecks is Roy William Neill, director of 11 of the 14 Sherlock Holmes films starring Basil Rathbone produced by Universal between 1939 and 1946.

"He has really excellent staging, where he can take us from a close-up of an object into a single, into a wide shot of the room, into a profile two-shot, then end on a close-up, and get us through the whole scene in a very elegant way. When it's done well, you feel the live-time essence of the scene more, and it's more engaging."

Quite what the nine-year-old Eggers would make of the results, we shudder to think... But he'd surely be thrilled to know how his future self – set on the path by an old black and white still – turned out.

Nosferatu is in cinemas from 1 January.

THE COUNT FIVE

More takes on Murnau

NOSFERATU THE VAMPYRE (1979)

A great admirer of Murnau (he's described *Nosferatu* as "the greatest German film"), Werner Herzog cast Klaus Kinski as the Count (here called Dracula) for his haunting, bleakly beautiful homage – the first of five tempestuous collaborations between the pair. The director found the demands of the make-up acted as a "harness" on his splenetic star: "You see, if he threw a tantrum and beat the ground with his fists, the make-up would be ruined and he would be another four hours," he later explained.

Stream it: BFI Player

VAMPIRE IN VENICE (1988)

Six years after the Herzog movie's release, Kinski was cast as the lead in a sequel (also known as *Nosferatu In Venice*), in which a séance causes the vampire to be awakened in Venice in 1996, where he's pursued by a British professor (Christopher Plummer).

Filming quickly descended into chaos, with Kinski refusing to shave his head and wear fangs, follow cues or shoot retakes, his behaviour eventually prompting a mass walkout by the crew. Far worse, it's also documented that he sexually assaulted two female co-stars.

Stream it: Tubi

SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE (2000)

The fact that Willem Defoe plays Van Helsing type Professor Von Franz in Robert Eggers's version is fitting given that Defoe was once Orlok himself. In E Elias Merhige's fictionalised account of the making of the Murnau film – a portrait of artistic obsession – Defoe plays Max Schreck, who's revealed to be *not* simply an actor giving a convincing performance, but a genuine vampire who's done a deal with the director. Defoe's portrayal earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor.

Stream it: Prime Video

AMERICAN HORROR STORY (2015)

Though the principal focus of "Flicker", a fifth-season episode of the anthology show, is Rudolph Valentino, it also riffs upon the same idea explored in *Shadow Of The Vampire*. In a flashback, we learn that the silent movie star met FW Murnau while on a promotional tour for his film *The Son Of The Sheik*, who "sired" him into vampirism. The director travelled deep into the Carpathians while making *Nosferatu*, in the pursuit of authenticity, and discovered an "ancient blood virus" which brings eternal life.

Stream it: Disney+

NOSFERATU: A SYMPHONY OF HORROR (2024)

David Lee Fisher's "remix" of Murnau had a long journey to the screen. Funded via a Kickstarter campaign a decade ago, with principal photography completed the following year, it finally hit streaming services this October.

Combining footage of regular Guillermo del Toro collaborator/*Star Trek: Discovery* star Doug Jones as Orlok (acting against greenscreen) with digital recreations of sets from the original movie, it's essentially a scene-for-scene remake, but with the addition of dialogue. An interesting concept... but it doesn't really work.

Stream it: Prime Video, Apple TV+

WERNER HERZOG FILMPRODUKTION, SCENA FILM PRODUCTION, BBC FILMS/METRODOME, BEAMSCREEN PRODUCTIONS, ZEMRAK PIRKLE PRODUCTIONS

101

THE STONE TAPE

BLU-RAY DEBUT
LIMITED EDITION

RIGID BOX WITH
ARTCARDS AND BOOKLETS

INCLUDES:
'CHILDREN OF
THE STONE TAPE',
A NEW DOCUMENTARY
FEATURING:
MARK GATISS,
PETER STRICKLAND
& JANE ASHER

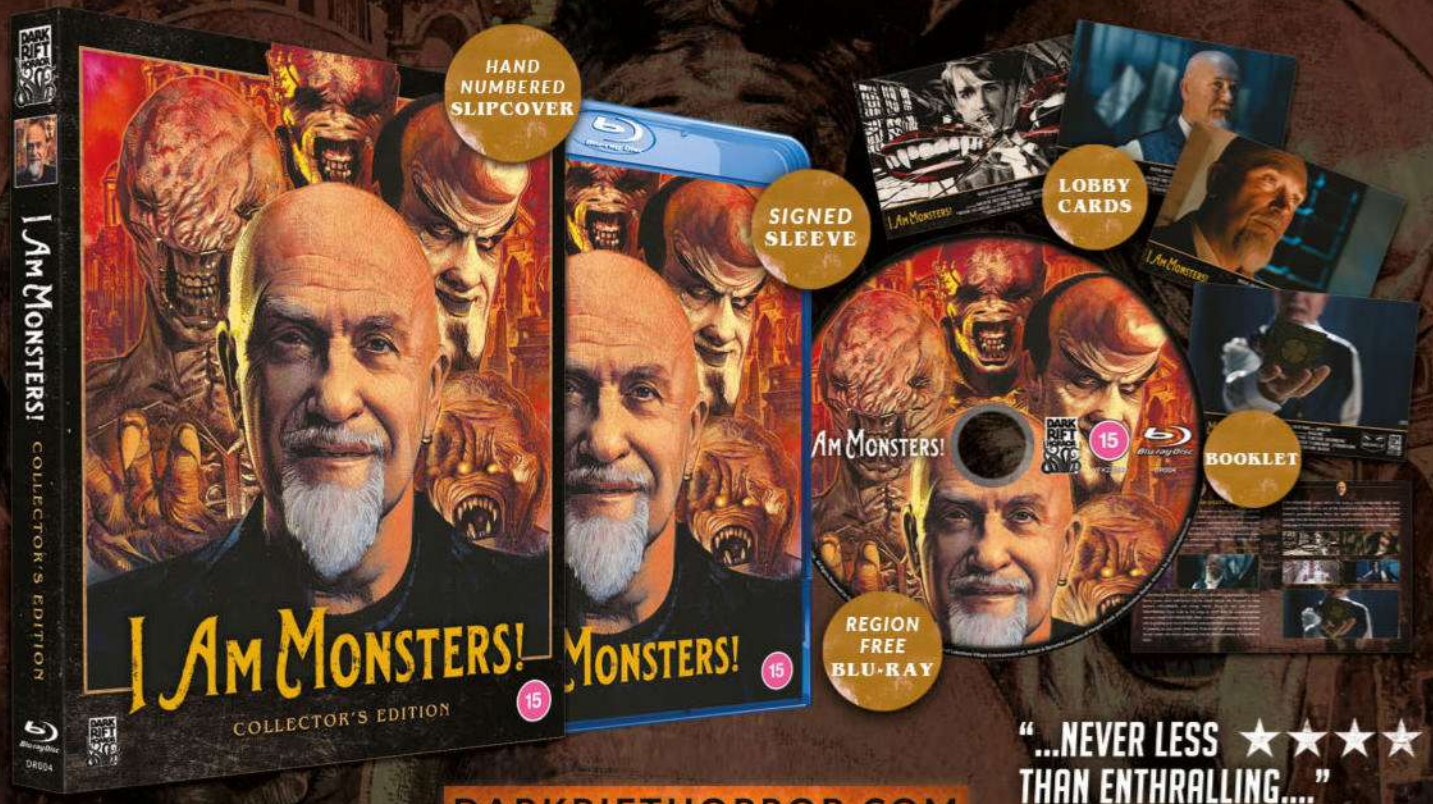
RELEASE DATE:
9TH DECEMBER

101-FILMS-STORE.COM

@101FILMSUK

I AM MONSTERS!

COLLECTOR'S EDITION
LIMITED EDITION OF 500



"...NEVER LESS ★★★★ THAN ENTHRALLING...."
STARBURST

DARKRIFTHORROR.COM

OPENING THE BOX

THE STAR AND DIRECTOR OF THE BOX OF DELIGHTS CELEBRATE 40 YEARS OF A CULT CHILDREN'S CLASSIC

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

ALL PICTURES © BBC, STOCK IMAGERY: GEENGRAPHY, ARTBALITSKIY/GETTY

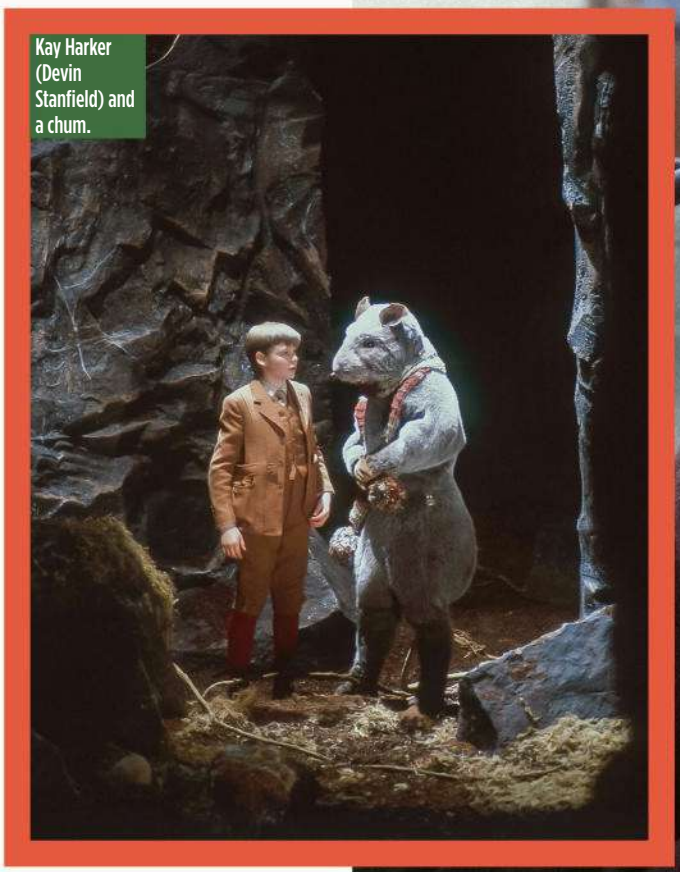
FORTY YEARS AFTER AIRING on BBC1, *The Box Of Delights*– an adaptation of the 1935 novel by John Masefield – is regarded by many who were children at the time as a classic television series of their generation, nestled in their memories alongside *The Chronicles Of Narnia* and *Tom's Midnight Garden*. Now grown up, these nostalgia-seeking fans consider it a staple of Christmastime viewing.

However, the fantastical story of Kay Harker – a young boy who is transported through time by a mysterious box – didn't register as quite such a dream job for director Renny Rye on his first script reading.

"The boy Kay wakes up in his house at night," he recounts. "He walks downstairs, opens the back door, and there's a white horse standing in the snow. He walks over to the horse, climbs on, and rides bareback across a moonlit landscape, through woods, over a field.

"Then the horse takes off, magically flies back in time, and lands in the middle of a pre-Roman encampment where wolves are attacking the natives.

"This is a one-paragraph stage direction at the beginning of a six-part serial," Rye adds, laughing. "I had no idea how to do it!"



Kay Harker (Devin Stanfield) and a chum.

WORLD BUILDING

Requiring a significant amount of camera trickery, *The Box Of Delights* was considered to be the most ambitious programme the BBC had undertaken for children.

"They [the BBC] said, 'Oh there's all these new techniques', so I sat there and scratched my head and started to work out how the hell we did it," continues Rye – a relatively new director at the time, with episodes of *Dramarama* and *Rentaghost* among his credits. "That was great fun. I had worked on a few programmes that used bluescreen and I knew how that worked. But it was incredibly limiting in those days."

Rye chose 12-year-old Devin Stanfield to play the role of Kay. Stanfield read the book on the train to his audition and believes he impressed the director by asking questions about how it would be translated to the screen.

Despite coming from a theatrical family (his grandfather – a friend of Laurence Olivier – performed at the National Theatre), Stanfield had no interest in becoming an actor himself. "I knew exactly what a shit show all of that was and had no real desire to be any part of it," he tells *SFX*. "I had no desire to go to drama school really; no desire to be around luvvies."

It all happened by "random fluke", following a visit by his mother to an old school-friend whose own mother ran a theatrical casting agency. "They were doing the showing-each-other-photos-of-their-children thing. She said, 'Your kids are very photogenic, can I put them on my books?' My mother came home, and said, 'Do you want to do that?' I didn't really understand what it meant, to be honest. I just went 'Oookay!'"

An impetus for Stanfield was the chance to escape school, where he "wasn't particularly happy". When he was cast in *The Box Of Delights*, Stanfield had appeared in ITV John Wyndham adaptation *Chocky*, but Kay was his first leading role. He laughs, considering it "blind stupidity, probably" to have agreed to such a mammoth undertaking at a young age.

"I had definitely not been on anything quite so prestigious, so I didn't really understand how big a deal it was," he says. "I think maybe it dawned on me it was a big thing when I got into the rehearsals and there was Patrick Troughton who I knew from *Doctor Who*.

"Also Robert Stephens who at that point had an illustrious career I was unaware of, but what I did know him from was playing Aragorn in the radio adaptation of *Lord Of The Rings*, which was a massive deal at that point in my childhood. I recognised Patricia Quinn from *Rocky Horror*. These were huge names."

Not that he felt in any way intimidated to share the camera with them.

"Maybe I'm naturally quite confident, I don't know. Confidence of the naïve; not really understanding. I was very well protected and very well nurtured and mentored.

"My own lack of experience, skill, ability, what have you – because I was never really a very good actor, I don't think – was made up for by being constantly surrounded by such lovely and kind and serious professionals like Jimmy Grout [the Inspector] and Carole Frazer [Caroline Louisa] – who I did a lot of close scenes with.

"They just made it so much easier for me. And Renny is very good with kids, at both auditioning and casting them to the right type and then handling them. So my hand was held very firmly all the way through by people much more skilled than myself."

Despite filming from January till mid-year (a delay was enforced when Stanfield caught chickenpox), *The Box Of Delights* brings to the screen a

Patrick Troughton played Cole Hawlings.

The Severn Valley Railway was one key location.

A young boy and a sword, what could go wrong?

THE MAGIC MAN

Working with a legend

One of Stanfield's stand-out memories is filming Kay's first encounter with Patrick Troughton's peculiar Punch and Judy man Cole Hawlings at Bewdley Station, Worcestershire.

"I think that's the first time in my life I've been face-to-face, on camera, in a scene with someone *truly* good," he says. "You can tell that my reactions are – well you can't, but if you *think* I'm acting, I'm not. Those are my natural reactions because he was mesmeric and powerful, and being that close to him, being able to smell his breath and see his eyes – there was almost like a heat coming off him.

"When he switched on, the intensity of his voice, you were like, 'Oh shit! This is *real* acting; this is somebody actually embodying a character and I'm suddenly up against them and I've got to react to them.' That was a very memorable moment."

Stanfield was also impressed with the time Troughton took to sit and talk to him during breaks. "When we were on a really long shoot in the graveyard at one of the cathedrals, he spent the whole night explaining to me how they'd skewered him with the lightning rod on *The Omen*. It entertained me enormously."

> **"I think maybe it dawned on me it was a big thing when I got into the rehearsals"**

Christmas so Christmassy that it almost looks like a card come to life.

"Towns love it when they suddenly have filming in March and the high street is full of decorations," Rye notes. "I've done that on a few Christmas *Midsomer Murders*."

Snow would be essential to conjure up the spirit of an icy winter. Rye consulted the BBC's weather forecast team who told him that an area inland from Aberdeen, Scotland, was guaranteed to be snowy at the end of January; just what was needed for the very first scenes he planned to shoot.

"So we booked the hotel, booked the crew," Rye says, "and just after the Christmas break, we went up to do a tech recce – where you show the cameraman and lighting director what you're going to do – and there was absolutely no snow at all. It looked like a total disaster.

"The locals said it would come. But Paul [Stone, producer] panicked and booked an incredibly expensive snow-making machine and arranged for it to go up.

"Whatever the Monday was that week when we were due to start filming, I flew into Aberdeen on the Saturday. My plane was the last plane to land in Scotland for a week because it snowed so heavily that all flights were abandoned."

Stanfield recalls that "The vans and the cameras and all the gear got stranded because the snow was so deep."

The setback resulted in a reduction of the number of shooting days from five to two-and-a-half. After the locations Rye had originally picked proved inaccessible, several scenes were staged in the grounds of the hotel. "It →

was pretty limiting," he says, with Stanfield reflecting on the "thankfully very picturesque" hotel gardens. "The fact that we got so many minutes of real snow on screen was pretty miraculous, given the light went at 3.00pm in Scotland at that time," the director adds.

The icy landscapes, while scenic, did however come at a cost for Stanfield. While filming a scene waist deep in snow in a ditch, his teeth chattered so badly he was unable to get his lines out.

"Miserable. Fucking horrible – you can quote me on that," he says, decisively. "Then going back to the tour coach which had diesel heaters in it, trying to warm my hands up to be able to do schoolwork because my hands were so numb I couldn't actually hold a pen!"

The alternative to freezing in the snow was "boiling in a coat and a horrible, scratchy Norfolk suit that I disliked wearing intensely – in a blazing TV studio under incredibly bright light doing CSO [Colour Separation Overlay]. So rarely was I ever in an ambient temperature.

"In fact, I remember being in the school uniform – shorts and a light coat – doing the train platform scenes, and that was like a dream. It was probably the only time I was at a comfortable temperature in a comfortable costume. The rest of it was nightmarish! All the glamour of television."

With John Horsley (right) as the Bishop of Tatchester.

Director Renny Rye (right) discusses a scene.

Foam snow was used once the real stuff had melted.

RUNNING WITH WOLVES

Two wolves were among the many animals to appear in *The Box Of Delights*. To boost their number, Rye's team made up the faces of several Belgian Shepherds to create a more wolf-like appearance, and lightly coated them in a grey powder.

"At one point one of the wolves comes flying through the frame – it had to attack Glyn Baker [playing Herne the Hunter]," Rye recalls. "That was the dog handler throwing the Belgian Shepherd from just behind the camera. It always looks a little bit like it was being thrown into shot," he adds, despondently.

> **"There's literally no way it would have passed a risk assessment these days"**

Stanfield remembers encountering the genuine article before a night shoot in Scotland. "I went down and sat by the cage and was talking to them," he says. "They were amazing."

Despite appearing in scenes with the wolves, he stresses that they were filmed separately. "There are probably rules about having wolves roaming with small children, I imagine!" Stanfield adds that had they filmed this today, "there's literally no way it would have passed a risk assessment."

In fact, during a recent reunion with Rye, Jo Dukes (Maria) and production designer Tony Guyan, a hot topic was health and safety on set. "Some of the stuff they had us do was way off," Stanfield says. "I just don't know you'd have ever been allowed. Kids on a scaffold in a freezing cold canal at night, in deep water," he adds of the young heroes' climactic escape through a flooding dungeon from Abner Brown (Robert Stephens). "There was some crazy shit going on with that." →

Chris Chapman (left) with composer Roger Limb.

Renny Rye, Devin Stanfield and Carol Frazer.

Chapman with the original Mr Punch prop from *Box*.

...AND BUTTERED EGGS

A new documentary reunites cast and crew for the 40th anniversary

According to Chris Chapman, viewers of his new feature-length Blu-ray documentary *Time And Tide* will see their favourite parts of *The Box Of Delights* being either "celebrated or explored", while at the same time learning "nugget after nugget of information about it, contextualising everything."

In creating "a massive great love letter" to the series, the director has gathered together 25 members of the cast and production team, many of whom speak about their experiences on the series for the first time.

"I feel like every interviewee has their own kind of secret story to tell," he tells *SFX*. "We've tried to make sure everybody gets a good shake of the stick."

Among those featured are some of the series' youngest stars, including Crispin Mair (Peter) and Devin Stanfield (Kay). "There's something really fun about seeing how people have grown up," notes Chapman. "Devin was 12 when he made *Box* and he's now 53. It's kind of nuts."

Stanfield admits that with no desire for exposure and nothing new to say about the series since filming a conversation with Rye in 2004 for the *Box Of Delights* DVD ("I felt everything we could say had been said"), he started out "really not wanting to do it. I was just going to say no".

But when Chapman indicated his desire for him to join Rye – whom he hadn't seen in two decades – on a road trip to some of the series' filming locations, he had a change of heart.

"I said 'Count me in', because for me getting to spend time with Renny is just a delight. 'Yeah, okay, fine', if I get to have two days telling stories and bumming about..."

"We spent a weekend going on the train at the Severn Valley Railway, returning to Wassell Wood House that doubled for Seekings House," Chapman says. "We went to Eastnor Castle which was evil Abner's lair, and Hereford Cathedral where the show ends. We had them basically as a double act.

"The thing I was really delighted by was the connection between them," he adds.

"We just never stopped talking," says Stanfield. "In fact, I think Chris got a bit frustrated – keeping us on track was quite difficult! But we had a fabulous time."

"It was great fun," Rye says. "It was very strange for me to be in the filming for two or three days and not actually running the filming. That was uncanny. I don't think I've ever been the subject of a film before."

The documentary features one particularly special guest: Stanfield's mother, Jo. "She was at home recovering from a really bad injury," he says, "and I think having someone come round and let her rabbit on about her son's acting career was a high point of her month!"

On reflection, Stanfield is glad to have taken part. "Maybe it was good for me to overcome my demons and my reservations about [the series].

"It allowed me to remember more of the positive things and it allowed me to clarify some of the crazy shit that happened, that I thought, 'Did I make that up? Did that really happen?' Like, yeah that really did happen, you really did do that. So yeah, that was all cool. I came away a bit more positive."

© MOON BALLOON PRODUCTIONS/BBC STUDIOS

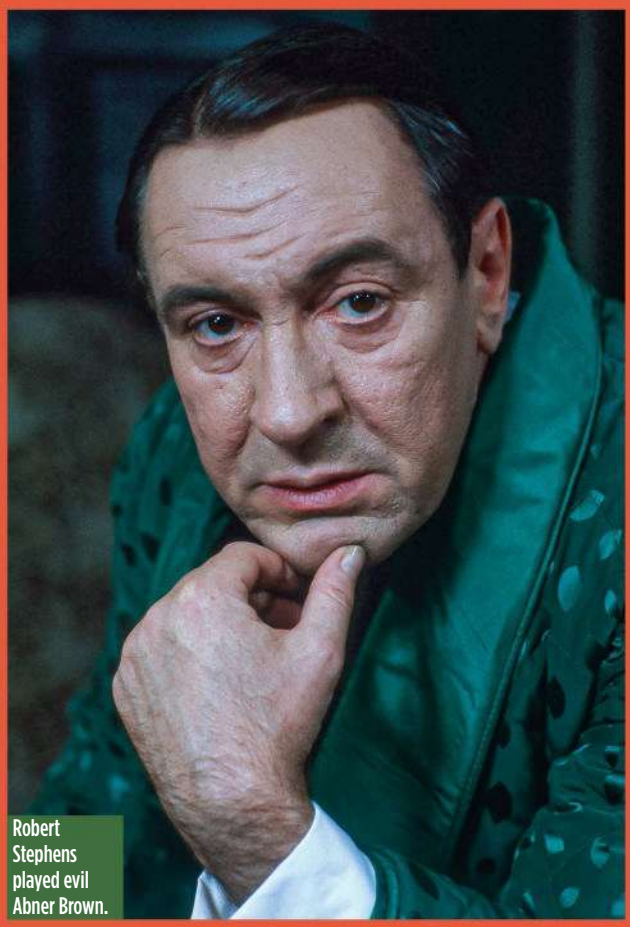
Rye recalls the potentially perilous moment when the young cast and Patrick Troughton (Cole Hawlings) were instructed to traverse an underwater platform in the darkness of a tunnel in Dudley.

"They were told if they walked along and they could feel the scaffold bar against their right shins then they were safe, because they wouldn't fall in," Rye says, noting that the depth was five feet and he didn't want to lose any of the more diminutive cast members.

"We'd given them wetsuits, but it was absolutely freezing wading through. They remembered it graphically! In fact, when I took them out for lunch, I chose a canal city next to a canal lock for the pub, just to remind them of me and canals!"

SFX suggests that for Stanfield, filming on horseback, flying on Kirby wires, handling swords, working alongside star names and, yes, wading through waterlogged canal tunnels must have felt as much as an adventure for him as it was for Kay Harker.

"Some of it was," he acknowledges. "Some of it was a ghastly slog, I can't tell you. For every moment like that there was an awful lot of getting from A to B shots and night shoots and extras. Lots of waiting. Lots of night shooting. I was on set 90-95% of the time. So it was pretty intense."



Robert Stephens played evil Abner Brown.

LASTING LEGACY

The series debuted on 21 November 1984. Two of the millions of viewers who tuned in were the young star and his mother, who has watched it "religiously" every Christmas since.

Stanfield has shared the series with his own young children, despite struggling to watch himself on screen. "When I see myself, all I see is a stage actor," he explains. "What little experience I did have had really come out of theatre, so I feel like all my facial expressions were way too big.

"I think I emote too much, and I think if only I had seen that famous masterclass by Michael Caine where you just think it – don't show anything, just think it – that looking back, I probably could have done much better if I'd been across that kind of school of acting. I feel very overemotive. I just feel very awkward about the whole thing, really," he adds.

From Rye's perspective, Stanfield's "brilliant, vivid imagination" shines. "When you described to him what he was supposed to be seeing, he could see it in his mind's eye and was able to respond naturalistically. He has a wonderful, natural range of responses and enough imagination to properly believe what he was acting in."

Stanfield concedes that when he rewatched the series recently, he did a little less cringing than before. "I remembered it with more fondness," he says. "I think 40 years is enough distance. For the first 10 years I just wanted it not to be a part of my life; it was pretty miserable. The rest of my school was blighted by that fame, and it didn't make for an easy ride thereafter. I was happy to bid it goodbye and move on."

Likewise, Rye describes the series as being a bit of an albatross around his neck for several years, comparing it to a hit record that he felt compelled to match.

"Even straight after, the BBC said to me, 'You've had that success, you've got to do *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* next year.' I said, 'Really? I've spent a year doing this, I want to do something totally different.' So I'm

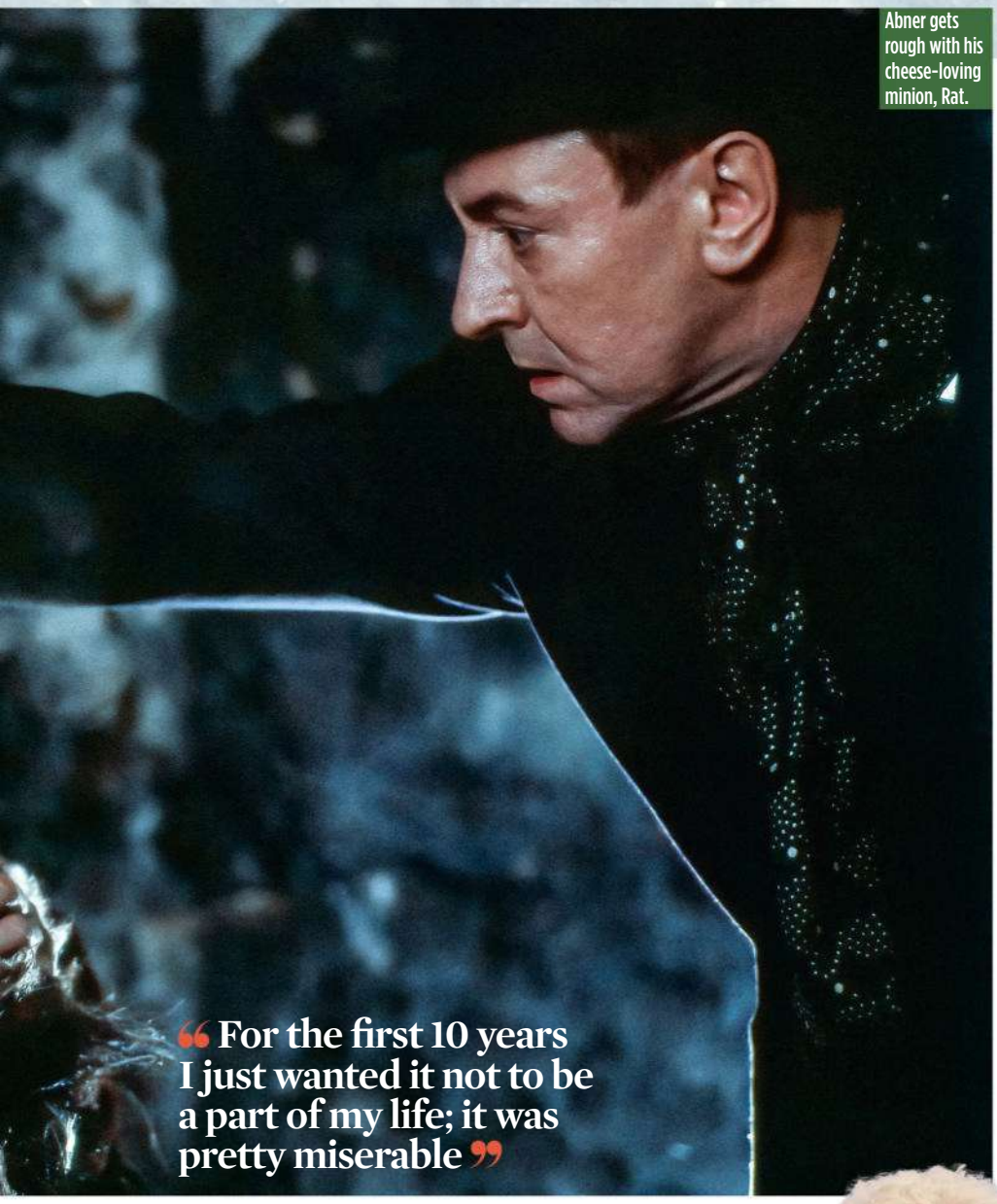
QUITE SHAKESPEAREAN

Casting Abner Brown

Bringing lashings of theatricality to the story's villain Abner Brown was Robert Stephens. Rye felt the actor suited the role, sent him the script, and they met up in the bar of the National Theatre after the performance of a pantomime he was appearing in.

"As I sat there, suddenly at the end of the bar appeared an Ugly Sister in full costume, full make-up, and with a massive wig," Rye recalls. "He came storming down and said 'Renny?' I said, 'Robert?' He picked me up and gave me a kiss, smack on the lips! I really don't remember much after that! God knows what I said in response. He took the part, saying he loved the story."

"I rank him up there with McKellen, Jacobi and Guinness as one of the true greats of the British stage," reflects Stanfield. "Shame alcohol got him."



Abner gets rough with his cheese-loving minion, Rat.

> **For the first 10 years I just wanted it not to be a part of my life; it was pretty miserable**

A miniaturised Kay and mouse spy on Abner Brown.

"This is the pause button, and this is skip track."

The Christmas service at Tatchester Cathedral.

afraid I turned that one down! But of course, over time, I now appreciate *The Box Of Delights* more."

Rye and Stanfield discovered the series' cult following after they heard about a fan club on Facebook that formed in the mid-2000s.

"They get together online and sit and watch each episode on the anniversary, one half an hour a week up to Christmas," says Rye. "I always thought this was a really sweet way of keeping it alive.

"I love the fact that *Box* has had an extended life, because it means it had a powerful impact on the audience – that's what's always rewarding. I am proud of it."

BOXING CLEVER

"I think it's seminal in terms of technology," Stanfield says, when asked for an explanation for the series' success and longevity. "Given its budget and the time that it was made, the fact that it successfully integrated some rather clever in front of camera effects – and some very low rent stuff as well, depending on budget – with CG, with animation, and it managed to somehow shoehorn all of those ingredients together.

"At that time, it was really revolutionary, and really unexpected for a children's show to be that ambitious. It's a significant moment both in BBC programming generally, in terms of its scale and ambition, and as a part of the BBC's heritage."

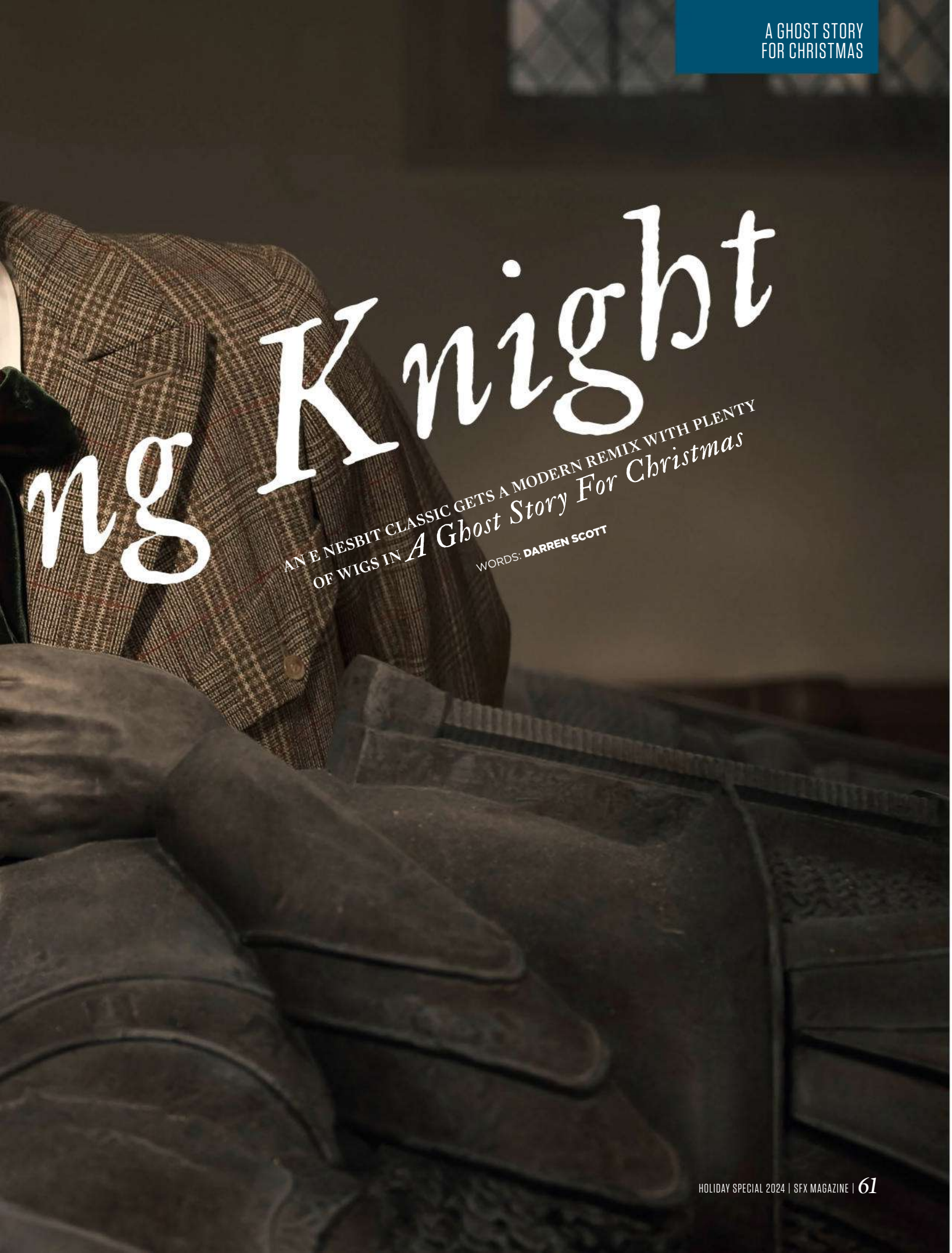
After leaving acting behind in 1984, Stanfield is now head of production for a London-based scenery company that designs, builds and installs sets for stage plays and television programmes such as *The Masked Singer* and *MasterChef*.

Rye went on to direct episodes of *Poirot*, *Silent Witness*, *Vital Signs*, and notably, the 1993 Dennis Potter television serial *Lipstick On Your Collar*.

All these years later, meanwhile, *The Box Of Delights* continues to delight new generations of fans.

The Box Of Delights is available on Blu-ray.

Everlasti



ng Knight

AN E NESBIT CLASSIC GETS A MODERN REMIX WITH PLENTY OF WIGS IN *A Ghost Story For Christmas*

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

SPOILER WARNING!

TWO SUITABLY HAUNTING occasions mark the arrival of *SFX* on the set for *A Ghost Story For Christmas* 2024. One, it's the week of Halloween and two, it's writer/director, and to all intents and purposes showrunner, Mark Gatiss's birthday.

"It's great, because I generally tend to do it around my birthday, and so I actually remember them vaguely, as opposed to them just drifting into nothingness," Gatiss grins.

We're a short train journey from London, in sprawling country grounds that contain a perfectly spooky church and a cottage that wouldn't look out of place in *Hocus Pocus*.

Standing outside the cottage – it only being large enough for the smallest of crews inside – we watch on monitors as Éanna Hardwicke (Jack) and Phoebe Horn (Laura), both in Victorian attire, sit at a dining table attended by Monica Dolan as housekeeper Mrs Dorman.

Jack asks about local customs and legends, saying there's nothing he likes more than "a proper blood-freezer on a winter's evening". As the fireplace roars behind them, and the couple are framed by candlelight and Christmas decorations, Mrs Dorman tells them an eerie tale of knights...

CHILDHOOD NIGHTMARE

This year's *Ghost Story* is *Woman Of Stone*, based on Edith Nesbit's "Man-Size In Marble". It is, Gatiss explains, the first one he ever read, at the age of seven.

"It really terrified me. Even things like the Ice Warrior tomb in 'Empress Of Mars' is basically because of this, I've always loved it," he laughs. "I've tried twice to do it, but we couldn't afford it, because we have to make the tombs. This time, brilliantly, we've got a little bit more and so we could do it. That's why it's finally happened."

He says there was a discussion about doing Nigel Kneale's "The Patter Of Tiny Feet", "but because I proposed doing this one a couple of years ago, it was sort of the next natural one to do."

Does this mean there's a loose plan in place for where *Ghost Story* may go in future?

"It's too hand-to mouth, to be honest, it could easily stop again," he explains. "Inevitably, what happens – and it's the same as what happened with Lawrence Gordon Clark – you start thinking outside the box a bit. So original ones are obviously what you want to do in terms of doing something different with it. But there's always a pull between that and what people want it to be at Christmas."

"Woman In Stone" starts in the 1920s, before telling the story in the 1880s via a flashback to the 14th century, and a "bit of medieval". That explains the rooms in a nearby building filled with railings of Victorian clothing from Angels Costume Hire. "Loads of wigs this year!" the producer gleefully tells us.

SFX's very own Darren Scott. (He's not in the film.)

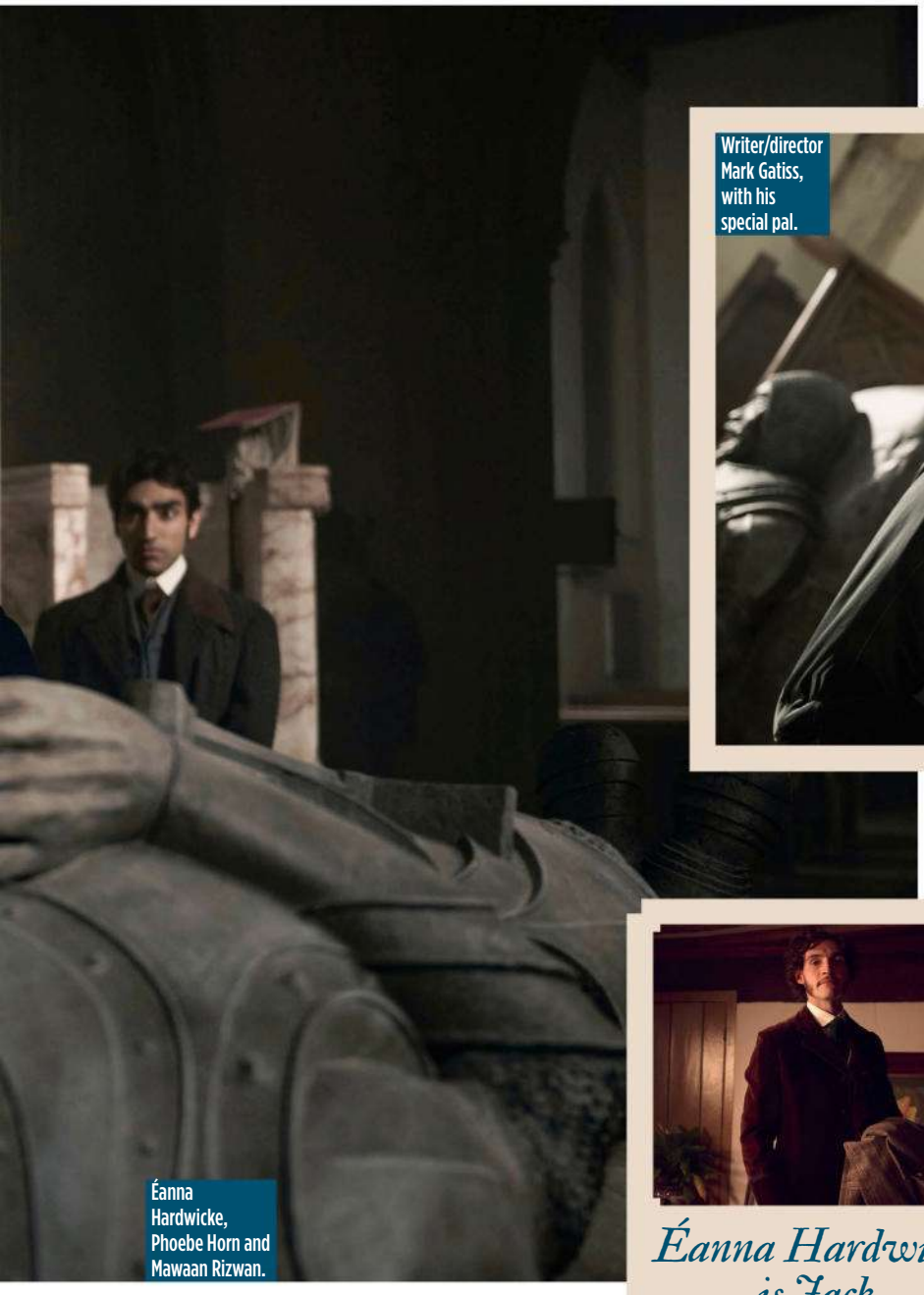
A removable finger? What could that mean?

> **"I've tried twice to do it, but we couldn't afford it, because we have to make the tombs"**

This house – actually, more like a mansion – was empty last week. On the previous Friday, "an army" comes in and it becomes a filming location for an annual Christmas tradition going back to at least 1971. A now defunct format – that of a 30-minute drama – it's always something of a challenge for Gatiss to bring to the screen. But this year they've not only been blessed with enough budget to tackle Edith Nesbit, they've also been given five filming days instead of four.

It's renamed because, Gatiss says, "it is an adaptation, more than usual. Because it's

PICTURES: RORY MULVEY, KIERAN MCGUIGAN/BBC, DARREN SCOTT



Éanna Hardwicke, Phoebe Horn and Mawaan Rizwan.

Writer/director Mark Gatiss, with his special pal.

actually quite a small, slight story, which I have given a definite slant to."

That said, we're on set when the original text is name-checked in the script by Mrs Dorman. There's a slight chill, despite the bright sun and birdsong...

"It's bookended by E Nesbitt, herself, on her deathbed," Gatiss explains, telling *SFX* that the author is played by Celia Imrie. "But in my imagination, the story already exists, and she tells it again to her doctor [Mawaan Rizwan] with a slightly different slant, as it were, to the published version.

"But I've definitely given it an angle, which it doesn't have, or perhaps is there to be teased out of it. I found that very interesting. As Jonathan Miller famously said, if you want to read the story, read the story. If you're going to adapt it, do something with it. Hence all his stuff with Alice in Wonderland, particularly [Miller produced a 1966 TV version].

"I'm always thinking about that. But equally, you can see why they make things like *Stigma* or *The Ice House*, because they're trying to actually do something different with it [the *Ghost Story* format].

"So to me, it's always the pull between the two things. You want it to be a Victorian costume drama with roaring fires and spooks. At the same time, doing it in a modern house, with a working class couple..." he muses, citing Remi Weekes's *His House* as an example and "the kind of stuff that really fascinates" him.

Éanna Hardwicke is Jack

On tackling demons

"It was brilliant. That's almost the 101 of acting, imagining a monster or dragon or a ghost or something, it's sort of the furthest you can go with it. So it was really fun. It's a really good challenge actually, just to go, 'I've got to believe in ghosts for this one'.

"But that's what I love about Mark's writing and these ghost stories, is when you're in those situations, that question of, 'Is it real? Can I trust my eyes?' That's just such an instinctively human question or predicament. It doesn't really matter what the answer is.

"It doesn't matter if the ghosts are real or they're in our head, or we create them, or there's just something we don't understand... it doesn't really matter what the answer is. I think the interesting thing is the fact that we ask the question, or we think that we see them. So it was my first experience in that kind of world, and I loved it."

WOMAN-SIZE

He says that this iteration of "Man-Size" differs from what might have been had world events – and budgets – not taken them in the direction of *The Mezzotint* in 2021.

"I know this story very well. I reread it a couple of years ago when we might have done it, and then I read it again, and I thought, 'As much as I love it, it needs something else'.

"I read the newish biography of Nesbit, and *totally* fell in love with that. There's all these brilliant things to tease out," he says, telling a story of the origins of "Man-Size" when Nesbit came face to face with 200 desiccated corpses in a Calais museum.

"I've made this story about domestic abuse and controlling behaviour, because I think that's what's in it. When you read it, for all its superficial kind of straightforwardness, Jack's →

Designs for the two knights, and their actors.

A whole five days for shooting? What a luxury!

a very controlling figure. I did a draft where I explicitly made it as if Nesbit was putting herself in the story, and it didn't quite work, mostly because she's not a feminist. Frustratingly she singlehandedly kept the family going, and yet she didn't really think women should have the vote. So it's not neat.

"But what I've tried to do is give the idea that on her deathbed, she slightly regrets being so indulgent towards her husband. But it's not that explicit. I tried to give the whole thing that flavour.

"This is a very *different* flavour," he considers from the deliberately all-male cast of *Lot 249* last year. "It's really interesting what it does to the tone of the story to have a predominantly female cast, and for it to be, I think, by a woman. And what exactly a haunting is – it can be all kinds of things, not just a spirit."

ALTAR BOYS

We take a trip to the church next door, where the statues of two knights lay in waiting as though they've always been there. Such is the wonder of modern technology that they were 3D-printed in segments before being blended seamlessly together – except one has a mysterious removable finger that is attached by magnets.

More props for that ghostly Christmas vibe.

Mawaan Rizwan is Dr Zubin

On playing period

"I love it. I *love* it. Give me a wig any day. Give me a prosthetic any day. I'll happily have an earlier call time and sit in that make-up chair. I just think there's something so special about a transformation. I think a big part of me got into this line of work because that's what my seven-year-old wanted. My inner child just wants to play dress-up and can step into another dimension.

"I always think that period is the closest we'll get to a time machine. So I've always wanted to do it, and I'm really glad I got to do it in this way.

"I love the way the *Ghost Stories* sort of unfold, like a play. Also, any crossover between horror and creepy and Christmas, I have a lot of time for, because Christmas can get a bit corny. Halloween is my favourite holiday, favourite time of the year. I've got ritualist candles, pumpkins all over the flat. I love that shit. Witching season is my favourite season. So this was totally my bag. Too much, in fact!"

Dr Zubin and Laura (Phoebe Horn), having great fun.

"What I've got to have is the presence," Gatiss tells us. "So they're working on details that make them more than just two stone effigies. Because they're inanimate – almost entirely – I have to find a way of making them frightening without them moving," he explains.

"So the thing I keep coming back to is Robert Wise's brilliant film of *The Haunting*. Someone will ask an open-ended question, like, 'What's doing this?' and it cuts to an exterior of the house. Basically he's going, 'It's the house'.

"What I'm trying to work on is making them a big presence throughout. I'm trying lots of changes of light, just so it looks like they're slightly active. It's a real challenge.

"It's a bit like *The Mezzotint*, because it's a static thing that you're trying to make sinister," Gatiss offers. "Obviously, that changed between scenes. But it's a similar sort of thing. There's no Harryhausen. We don't see them moving in that way. So we have to imply a lot. But I'm really excited about that part. Very excited."

We're told that this year's shoot has a lot

Celia Imrie as Edith Nesbit herself, on her deathbed.

The mighty Monica Dolan plays Mrs Dorman.

> **"I did a draft where I explicitly made it as if Nesbit was putting herself in the story"**

more nights, shadows and tension to create the spooks that go hand in hand with *A Ghost Story For Christmas*. There's also, as ever, a huge amount of attention to detail in props and sets. A large piece of wood is being painted grey. The person explains there's a black tile near the altar covering the crypt that looks strange on camera.

What seems like hundreds of candles are being cut down and slightly melted to give a used effect – Mawaan Rizwan later tells us he took loads home as part of his Halloween decorations. At one point a Penny Farthing goes past a doorway.

Another tradition is Gatiss including – or trying to, at least – Easter eggs that fellow genre fans may recognise. We haven't spotted any obvious ones... "Well, again to save money, because Jack is an artist, I've used loads of my drawings in the background," he laughs. "One of them is Tamsin Greig from *The Amazing Mr Blunden*!"

Which promps the question – what's going to happen to the knights once filming wraps? Turns out they're going to live in Gatiss's backyard.

"Ian [his husband] doesn't know yet," he laughs. "They'll be like Bok in Jon Pertwee's garden!"

A Ghost Story For Christmas is on BBC Two and iPlayer on Christmas Eve.

"Do you mind? Trying to get a bit of kip."

Phoebe Horn is Laura

On playing dead

"That was, I think, the first day of filming. Fabricating this image that is meant to be completely horrific, and this person's worst nightmare, but you've got to find it in, well, like 30 seconds. I didn't know it was happening and then all of a sudden, Mark's like, 'Okay, are you ready to go? Action!'

"I'm sat in this rocking chair still giddy at the fact that I'm even on the set. Because I'm just like, 'Wow, this is amazing!' So I'm so happy. I'm so gleeful. Then, like, 10 seconds, it's got to all go.

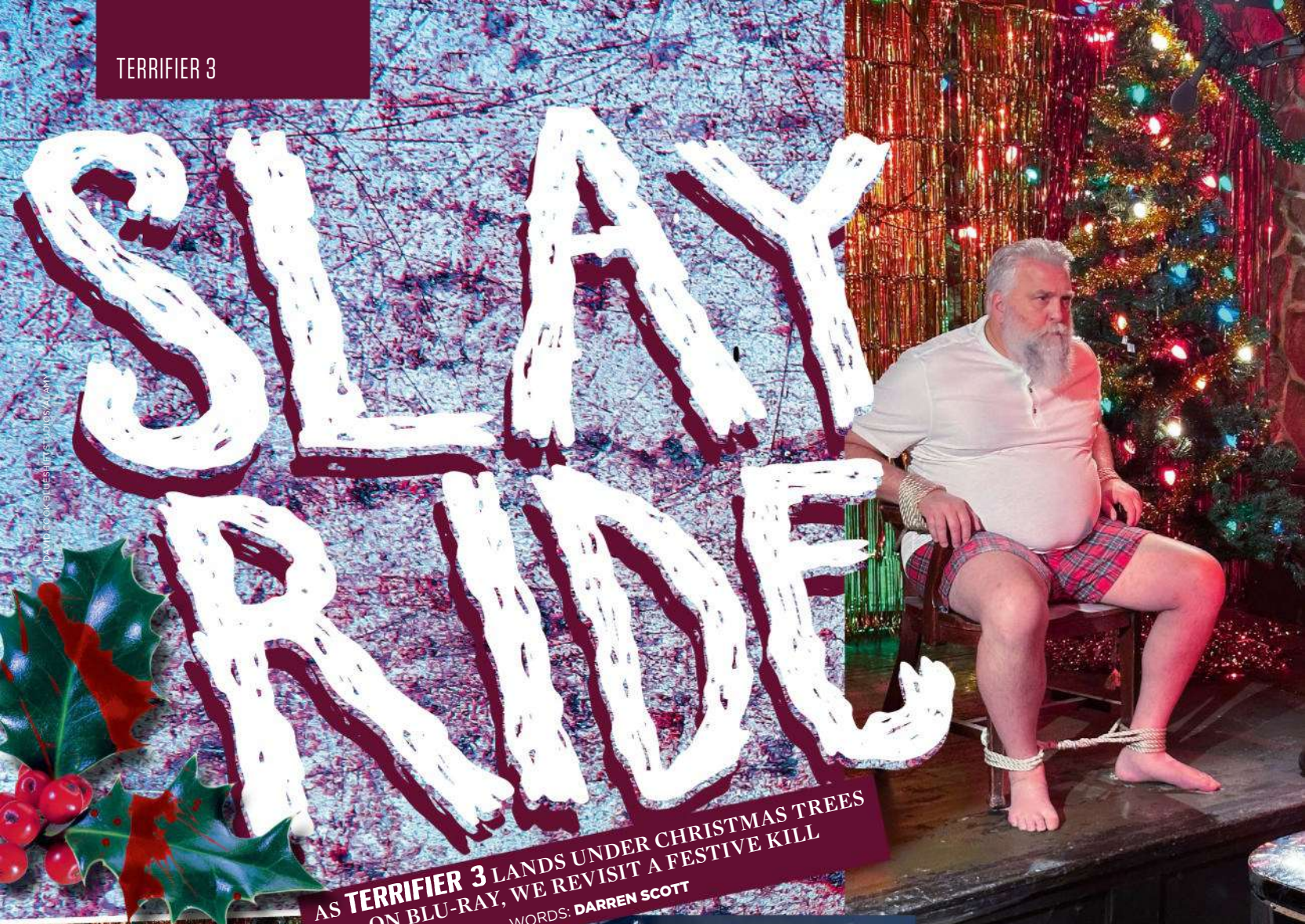
"It was much easier at the end, on Friday, because the guys who played the knights – amazing, amazing guys, one of which was in [stage play] *The Motive And The Cue* as well – have come to life. They're not the statues any more.

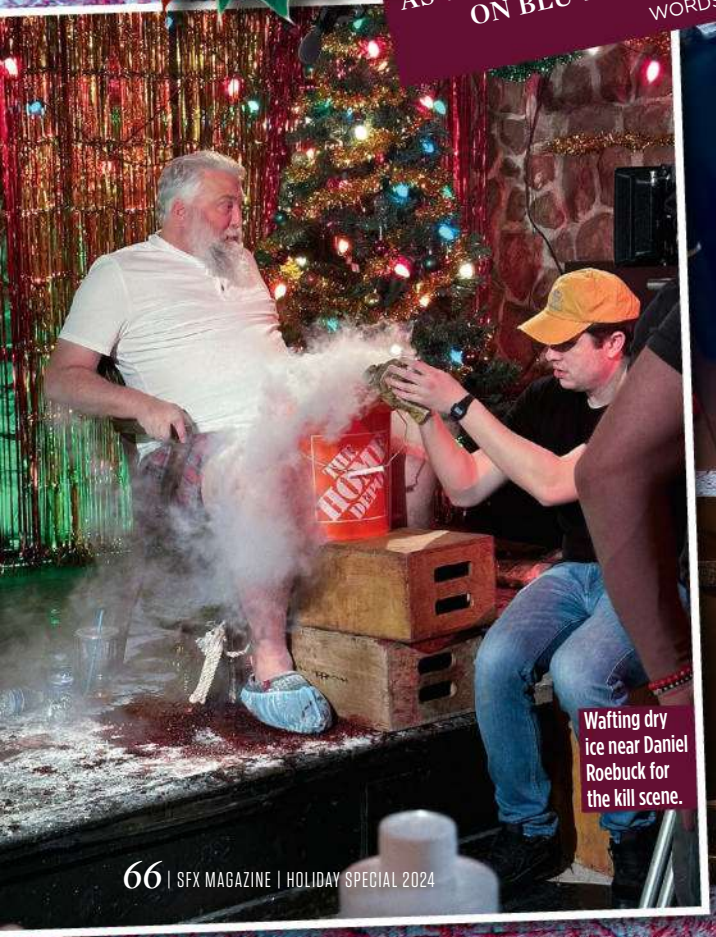
"You're not reacting to a shadow, or a 3D-printed, solid, emotionless thing. It was them coming towards me and strangling me. It was all of that. There's buckets of stuff to work with, and that's thrilling. Really, really exciting to find."

SLAY RIDE

AS **TERRIFIER 3** LANDS UNDER CHRISTMAS TREES ON BLU-RAY, WE REVISIT A FESTIVE KILL

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**





Wafting dry ice near Daniel Roebuck for the kill scene.

Red Drum? Oh, we get it... A very sticky situation.

Multiple elements went into making the scene.

David Howard Thornton as Art the Clown as Santa.

He's going to regret offering to buy a clown a drink...

The Freeze-O-Matic 3000 ready for its close-up!

Apparently you can't have real nitrogen on set...

Steubert's Bar in all its gory glory – not a bar at all!

MIDNIGHT ON STATEN ISLAND, New York. If you're getting a sense of déjà vu, yes, we already wrote about visiting the set of 2024 horror blockbuster *Terrifier 3* for our bestselling Halloween Horror Issue (still available to buy digitally, fact fiends). But what we *couldn't* tell you back in October – because of spoilers – was that we spent the day watching Daniel Roebuck, as Santa Claus, being tortured and killed by Art the Clown.

Now that the highest-grossing unrated movie of all time is coming to 4K, Blu-ray, DVD and digital, we thought it was the perfect opportunity to revisit *SFX*'s bloodiest moment.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

What's usually a themed restaurant is today the base of operations for the *Terrifier 3* team. The first half of the day is spent downstairs in a room dressed to look like a dive bar just a few days before Christmas. Roebuck – now stripped of his Santa outfit – is tied to a chair to film most of the torture scenes pre-effects. While he regales the crew with tales of working with Rob Zombie, upstairs Jason Baker, one of the special effects supervisors from Callosum Studios, is busy at work with a variety of props that are required to bring Santa's night to a sticky ending.

Today's speciality weapon of choice is the "Freeze-O-Matic 3000", Baker explains. "It's a mixture of a liquid nitrogen canister and a fire extinguisher. Just wacky, fun, exciting, Art the Clown murder tools. I think people are really gonna like it because it's reminiscent of the *Jason X* murder, which is the one thing everybody ever talks about from that movie, the liquid nitrogen death. But ours is cranked up to 11!"

Baker explains that one company will provide make-up effects, while his is responsible for speciality gag props. With everyone working in unison, he describes the set as "a symphony of carnage".

Another prop Baker and his team worked on was Art's chainsaw, as wielded during the shower and climactic battle scenes. "We nicknamed it Frankensaw because it's four different chainsaws put together. You'll see a piece from one, a different blade on the body of another chainsaw on the guts of a third chainsaw – it all came together to make Art's chainsaw."

He explains that was largely due to having to find a way around having gas indoors because of carbon monoxide. Much like the problem they're facing with the Freeze-O-Matic 3000 today. "Obviously you can't just spray liquid nitrogen. We asked, they said no," he jokes. "We make our shop a big mess, and then we send videos to them."

Downstairs, Roebuck has been replaced on the makeshift stage. →

STOCK ELEMENTS: NATALIA KOLOSOVA, ISTOCK/GETTY

"No one touch the leg! Just look at it! It's very delicate!" someone on production shouts.

The leg in question is a model with built-in sections that will smash easily – plastic tubes at the top of the leg will pump blood down so that it sprays out when the sections are broken. While you can see the joins as it's being prepared, once the frozen effects and dry ice are added it's seamless. There's a team of people working on all the elements required to make it work. One of them gingerly picks up a piece of smashed flesh...

Roebuck later switches back out with the prop to film his reaction shots, which require dry ice elements. One attempt to create the effect sees the veteran horror actor covered in white powder. Director Damien Leone laughs, shaking his head. "We're going to have to clean this, man..."

The scene is then filmed again, this time from over Roebuck's shoulder. Leone pops in to fix Art's wig and suggests different ways for the killer to react.

The dry ice element of the freezing effect takes various different attempts before they get what they want – each blast or bloody expulsion means everything has to be cleaned and reset before they can go again.

By 10pm David Howard Thornton is finished filming and is out of his Art the Clown make-up. A full animatronic model replica of →

Art the Clown gets a little retouch during takes.

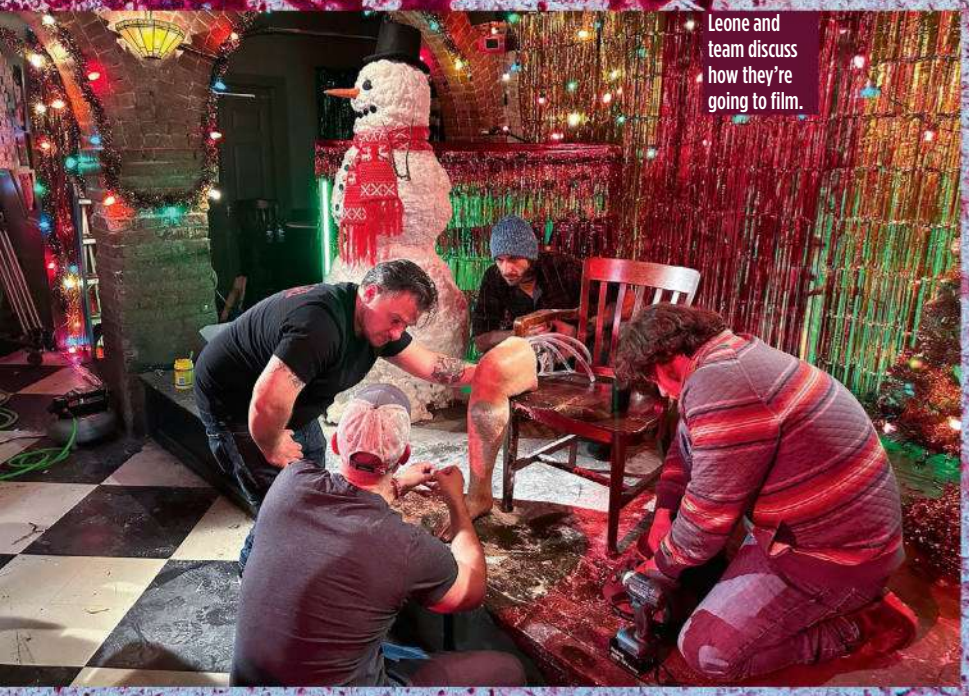
Be very wary of frostbite around this time of year.

Advising where the breaks need to be made.

Santa's leg post-smash, with blood pump in shot.

The smash panels get blended in and hidden.

Painting and assembling the parts of Santa's leg.



Leone and team discuss how they're going to film.

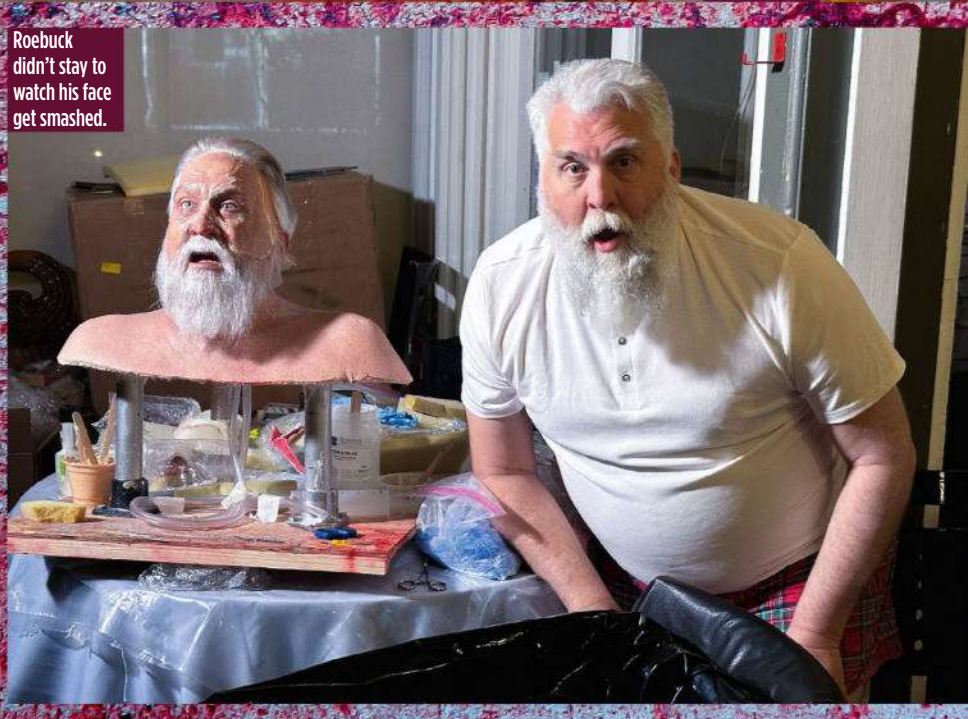
Mask for mask... A box of Art faces new and old.

One of the dry ice attempts goes a little bit haywire.

The prop before it's completed and ready to film.

What's left of Santa's head after filming is completed.

Editor Darren Scott wins at the biggest beak contest.



Roebuck didn't stay to watch his face get smashed.

Roebuck's head is now on stage with a stunt double standing in for Art. Even as the scene is prepared, the set is being stripped around and picked clean so that production can be out by midnight.

Like the leg before it, the head has removable panels designed to break and reveal the skull underneath. With the camera covered in plastic sheeting, the head is duly smashed. Property master Scott Klausen is *covered* in blood. The crew howl with laughter and rush to look.

KILL SCENE

But as always with the best laid plans of mice and directors, one of the effects hasn't quite worked. With time running out before they have to leave the location, Leone starts hacking away at the skull prop with scissors in order to make the snowman carrot fit in the nose cavity. It's snow joke.

Hot glue is called for to keep the carrot in place, but Leone points out that he still wants to see the eye rolling around as the fake vegetable is put in place. They quickly coordinate shoving it into place while the mechanical eyeball rolls, with someone holding the skull from behind.

What you're seeing across mere moments in the kill scene has taken hours to film – and much more to prepare – before being pieced together from many different takes.

There's still one final part of the scene to complete at 11pm: the arm being smashed. Producer Phil Falcone stands in as a body double for Santa, much to the amusement of the crew. Falcone gets masked up, into a matching shirt and simply lifts his arm up.

The frozen prop clutching the chair looks seamless. The matching shorts are simply placed over his trousers. "I'm acting my ass off!" Falcone shouts and the crew are in hysterics. "Welcome to *Terrifier*," Leone says to *SFX* with a grin as the last shot is successfully completed.

With Santa finally put to rest and the crew still in good spirits gone midnight, it's anything but a silent night.

Terrifier 3 is available on digital platforms now and on DVD, Blu-ray and 4K UHD from 16 December.

The panel here is designed to smash easily on contact.

This prop cost more than the entire first movie budget.

The director steps in to get his hands even dirtier...

Steubert's barman takes a load off after a long shift.

GENRE LEGEND DEE WALLACE, STAR OF **CRITTERS**, TAKES US BACK TO RURAL KANSAS TO REFLECT ON THE CLASSIC CREATURE FEATURE'S INSATIABLE AFTERLIFE

WORDS: **SIMON BLAND**

YOU ARE WITH

CINEMA HAS LONG DELIGHTED US with a universe of intergalactic nasties all too eager for human flesh, but no movie alien has ever had an appetite quite like those found in *Critters*. Released in 1986, director Stephen Herek's debut feature about a small-town farming family terrorised by a gang of grinning space criminals that grow in size as they eat went on to defy expectation and quickly became a cult favourite.

Despite arriving just two years after Joe Dante's similarly chaotic creature feature *Gremlins*, *Critters* managed to make its own mark, presenting a deadlier brand of monster movie with a meatier comedic bite.

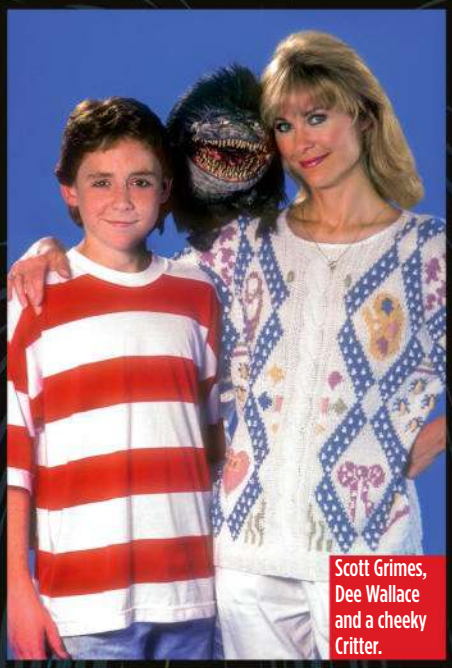
Combining aspects of a lived-in science fiction world with grisly late-night horror and explosive dark humour, Herek's lo-fi original went on to spawn three direct sequels, alongside 2019's web series *Critters: A New Binge* and the feature-length reboot *Critters Attack!* later that same year.

Everywhere these permanently hungry furballs went, a path of death and destruction was left in their wake. However, genre icon and star Dee Wallace assures us that despite all of the blood, bites and seemingly neverending night shoots, production on *Critters* was one of the most fun experiences of her career.

COUNTRY LIFE

"The minute you read a script you know whether or not you like it – and I liked *Critters*," she tells *SFX*. Herek's screenplay was co-written with fellow writer Domonic Muir and Don Keith Opper, who also starred as crackpot ufologist Charlie. As middle-American mum Helen, Wallace was forced to join the fray to protect the family homestead from the movie's snack-loving space pests, amid a cast that also included Billy Green Bush and future star of *The Orville*, Scott Grimes.

"Every actor is looking for a good role and this allowed me to do a lot of emotional work, which is my forte and what I loved to do," Wallace adds.



Scott Grimes, Dee Wallace and a cheeky Critter.

For her, *Critters* was a movie of two halves – and while the part involving flesh-eating aliens and the bounty hunters (led by Terrence Mann's glam-chic Johnny Steele) on their tail may have been a tad out of this world, the script's depiction of humble rural life felt very familiar.

"I thought the role was very close to my roots in Kansas," she continues. "I understood the farm family – not that I'm from a farm, but the mentality of Kansas City where I was raised is a very small-town family-based atmosphere. I understood the character and thought it was funny too," she smiles. "I loved the humour and thought it was a different take on combining sci-fi with horror."

Herek and his special effects team had a real job on their hands ensuring the humour of their aliens came purely from their dialogue and not from their looks. For the most part, it was a simple matter of intuitive thinking. Led by effects supervisor Chuck Stewart, Herek designed his Critters (or Krites as their species is referred to in the movie) in such a way that disguised their limitations. When audiences saw these little balls of fur on the move, what they were really watching was a bowling ball with dark fur glued onto it, thrown from one side of the screen to the other. In hindsight, it's this type of practical-effect ingenuity that gave *Critters* and its creatures much of its charm – but back in 1986, it was certainly a risk.

"One of my first questions, if not the first question, whenever I do any kind of creature film is, 'Do you have enough money to really make the creatures work, and who's designing them?'" says Wallace. "Because you can have a really strong staple of character actors and strong direction, but if it revolves around a special effect and that special effect doesn't work, you might as well not even do the film.

> "There would be guys at the edge of the frame literally rolling the Critters across us"

"It was funny for the actors because we would be in these highly emotional states and the director would go, 'Okay, roll them in!' and there would be guys at the edge of the frame literally rolling the Critters across our pathway," she laughs.

And there were other limitations, especially as the movie's constantly growing creatures reached critical mass. "In our movie, the big Critter wasn't really done yet, so the only shot of it you see is just its eyes coming through the bedroom window."

While it's funny to look back at the "whatever works" nature of '80s special effects, it does make you wonder: was Wallace sure the gamble would pay off? "It was more after I saw the finished product if I'm going to be really honest," she says candidly. "Just like the werewolf in *The Howling*, which my buddy Joe Dante directed, the lighting, how you spray →

PICTURES © ARROW VIDEO, SHO FILMS, (1) TCD/PROD.DB / ALAMY; STOCK ART: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

ARE YOU EAT

Jay (Billy Green Bush) grapples with a Krite.

them down, how you photograph them and the angles, are all so very important for bringing them to life in the way that they're meant to be seen.

"But the actor is not privy to any of that," she adds. "The actor is just seeing these little hairballs roll across their path. It's our job to make them real, make them alive and make them fearful because the more they affect us, the more they affect the audience.

"People sometimes don't understand the humour but also the challenge of working with special effects, but these little guys came off great. People loved them and laughed at them, yet there was a nice element of fear in there too."

GUNNING FOR IT

While Wallace and her co-stars were being terrorised on-screen, life off-screen wasn't much better. With much of the action taking place over the space of one night, *Critters*' scant six-week production schedule called for exhausting late-night filming sessions – and lots of them. "The hardest thing about shooting *Critters* was the very long night shoots," remembers Wallace. "Shooting nights can really take a toll on you energetically, so that was the biggest challenge."

However there was one other aspect of the role that Wallace found particularly difficult to nail. As the Krites' attack on the family intensifies, Helen is forced to protect her home in any way she can. "Another big challenge for me was working with guns," reveals Wallace, recalling Helen's transformation into trigger-happy Krite-killer. "I don't like guns at all and yet I always seem to have to have a gun in a lot of the movies I do. Whenever I look at those scenes I think, 'Dear god...'

"You can tell I've never held a gun in my life," she laughs. "In some roles that would work, but I'm supposed to be a farm woman who knows how to do that stuff. I remember when my husband saw it he said, 'Jesus honey, I've really got to take you out to a gun range and show you how to do that.' I told him I'm never going to be caught at a gun range, we'll have to practise with the broom. I remember us laughing quite a bit about how stupid I looked with that gun."

The Krites were the work of the Chiodo Brothers.

> "People loved them and laughed at them, yet there was a nice element of fear in there too"

Hitting cinemas in April 1986, *Critters* was met with warm reactions from fans and critics alike, who revelled in its lo-fi charm, dark humour and silly sense of twisted fun. Not long after its release, the VHS boom helped introduce Herek's film to a whole new batch of viewers, while those who saw it the first time around were given the opportunity to strengthen their bond with the movie and, over time, cement its status as a cult favourite.

"I think *Gremlins* paved the way for us a little bit," says Wallace, reflecting on the movie's debut. "It was kind of a *Gremlins*-esque movie, but I was extremely pleased with how it came out, how it was edited and how it was

PICTURES © ARROW VIDEO, SHO FILMS, (I) TCD/PROD DB/ EVERETT COLLECTION / CINEMATIC / ALAMY.

Apparently even Critters have problems with baldness.

Johnny (Terrence Mann), Charlie (Don Opper).

Below: Steve (Billy Zane) has an incident.

released – and I was really very pleased at how it was accepted by the fans. I think it solidified me more as a leading actress and it opened up a lot of doors into TV for me at that time. Like any successful project that you do, it nourishes your career, and *Critters* certainly did that for me."

Not looking good for April (Nadine van der Velde).

Despite starring in a number of iconic fantasy features over the years – including *Cujo*, *The Howling* and *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* – *Critters* is one of the few features that Wallace has revisited later down the line. "Back in 2019, I went to South Africa and did a sequel to it called *Critters Attack!*, so the franchise lives on," she smiles.

Much like the Krites themselves, audiences always seem hungry for more – so when it comes to Wallace's involvement in the *Critters* world, is there room for seconds?

"As long as the fans want more stories, there's more stories to be told," she says. "*Critters Attack!* did so incredibly well and there's no better or more loyal fan than a science fiction and horror fan. *Critters* was a joyous experience in my life – and here we are years later and the fans are still asking for more!"

Critters is available on Arrow Blu-ray.

BITE NIGHT

Five more of the decade's finest creature features

AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON (1981)
Director John Landis told us to beware the moon – and he was right. His story of an American backpacker who suffers an unfortunate run-in with a lycanthrope while traversing the Yorkshire Moors gave us one of cinema's most celebrated depictions of a werewolf transformation, courtesy of special effects wizard Rick Baker. Truly a modern monster classic.

GREMLINS (1984)
Avoid bright lights, don't get them wet and whatever you do, never feed them after midnight. Sadly, Zach Galligan's Billy Peltzer broke all three of these rules in record time in director Joe Dante's much-loved little monster movie, resulting in a lot of gremlins and a trashed Kingston Falls. Its 1991 sequel took aim at audiences, but 1984's original is packed with nostalgic charm.

ALIENS (1986)
James Cameron followed Ridley Scott's atmospheric science fiction classic by replacing tension with gung-ho warfare and sending Sigourney Weaver's hard-as-nails Ellen Ripley to the colonised moon LV-426 with a gang of military grunts. It also introduced audiences to Carrie Henn's plucky kid-survivor Newt, but it was the action that stole the show here.

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS (1986)
It wasn't all creatures, beasts and aliens threatening unsuspecting folks in the '80s, there were massive bloodthirsty plants, too. Director Frank Oz combined his Muppet-making expertise with the musical songwriting skills of Howard Ashman and Alan Menken for a film that had catchy tunes and evil blooms, as alien plant Audrey II gobbled its way through New York City.

PREDATOR (1987)
Arnold Schwarzenegger went toe-to-toe with a jungle hunter from another world in a science fiction classic from director John McTiernan that was packed with social and cultural commentary. All together now: "Get to da choppa!"

SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS/GETTY, WARNER BROS, 20TH CENTURY FOX/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK, UNIVERSAL PICTURES

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

GAIL SIMONE

Swords and sexism: the comics luminary tells us about her first novel

Words by Jonathan Wright

WHEN SHE WAS FIRST OFFERED THE chance to write comics starring Red Sonja, Gail Simone really wasn't that interested in the idea. Things might have ended there were it not for the fact that, when publisher Nick Barrucci called up, Simone's mother was around.

"She says, 'Well you're going to write *Red Sonja*, aren't you?'" remembers Simone. "And I said, 'No, I don't think so.' And she said, 'What? She's my favourite, you have to write her.' And I said to myself, 'Really? She never said a word to me.'" Thus began a maternal campaign of nagging that eventually concluded with Simone agreeing to write six issues of a character she associated with "the '80s movie or an airbrushed painting on the side of a stoner van".

But sometimes mother really does know best, because as soon as she sat down to write Sonja, she had a blast. "What sets her apart from the other female superheroes that I write is, first of all, she's not really a superhero," Simone says. "She sleeps in the dirt, she drinks, carouses, has sex with who she wants. She doesn't think about tomorrow, she doesn't care about yesterday. She's in the moment, and that's a really fun character to write."

Readers shared her enjoyment and Simone's partial reboot of the character was warmly received. But comics aren't always the best places to explore backstories, hence in part Simone switching to prose for her debut novel, *Red Sonja: Consumed*.

"It's an origin story in that we get to learn a lot more about her that there was not always time in the comics to dive into," says Simone of a book that shows Sonja as "a legendary character" – a She-Devil With A Sword, but also someone whose motivations we come to understand.

BREATHE EASY

How did she find the switch to prose? When she's writing comics, Simone says, she can say "there's a bleak field and two samurai are fighting" and a "brilliant collaborator in the artist" will "bring that to reality for the reader". Books are different. "With a novel, the collaborator is the reader, so I provide the details but they see the picture." Having long written in a medium where "every panel is so precious", the contrast is that, "Writing novels, there's just so much space to breathe."

Not that you're aware, as a reader, of Simone luxuriating in having space. *Red Sonja: Consumed* moves at a crisp pace, the work of someone who has quickly mastered a new form. Or, to look at that another way, someone with 700-plus comics behind her and a keen sense of how stories work.

BIODATA

From
Oregon, USA

Greatest Hits
Simone's comics credits include *Deadpool*, *Wonder Woman*, *Birds Of Prey*, *Batgirl* and *Welcome To Tranquility*. She has also written for television and videogames.

Random Fact
Simone needs quiet to write because, "I have this thing where, if I hear words and I'm at my keyboard, I type them."

Simone began writing as a kid. Brought up "on a dairy farm in a very remote area in Oregon", she didn't see much on TV that entertained her. She had chores. There was "a lot of rain".

But as soon as Simone learnt to read, that became her passion. A mini mobile library brought books; it was, she says, "like an ice cream truck would be for most kids". Soon she was writing her own scenarios and giving parts to her younger brother and pets.

Even as a kid, a woman who says she later entered the comics industry "with a secret agenda... to make female characters have their own agency" was drawn to strong female leads. "Because I was the conductor, I didn't want to play the damsel in distress." Better to be Batgirl or Wonder Woman, "so my brother ended up being the one that had to be rescued".

A FRIDGE TOO FAR

At college, Simone majored in theatre arts but, in part because teachers and family discouraged her from writing, became a hairdresser. But Simone was "stubborn" and never gave up on writing. By the turn of the millennium, she was making a name for herself as a commentator on the comics industry.

Notably, in 1999, she came up with the phrase "women in refrigerators" to describe fiction where the "story was never about the female victim", but violence against women was used as a plot device to justify a male character's behaviour.

In 2000, she got her first break in comics when, on the basis of a weekly column that parodied pop culture, she was invited to pitch for work on *The Simpsons* comics.

"I said, 'Can I think about it?'" she says of this first call from a professional editor, "and there was a long silence on the other end, because I'm sure no one had ever said that to them before." Simone was "terrified", she explains: "I didn't consider myself a writer at that time". But she eventually grabbed the opportunity, and what's followed has been a glittering career.

As to the future, there will be another Sonja novel, and she'd love to see one of her own creator-owned comics on the screen. So maybe she could be a showrunner? Definitely not. Despite the confidence with which she talks, Simone suffers from social anxiety, she explains.

Promotional appearances are still a "work in progress". It's difficult to imagine her sitting in a writers' room. "I like to work alone in a dark room, that's how I write," she says – an approach that seems to be working brilliantly.

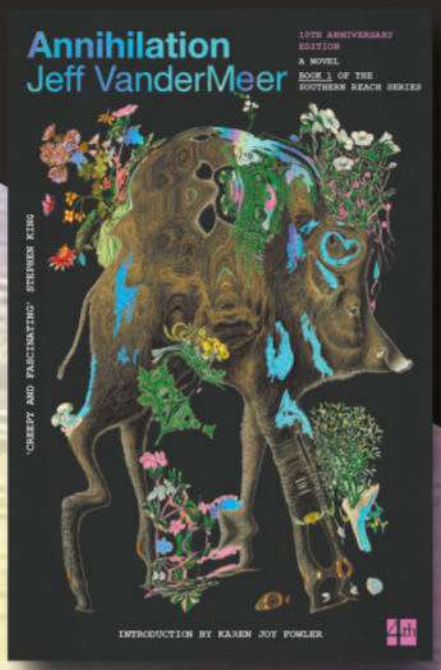
Red Sonja: Consumed is out now, published by Orbit Books.

“She sleeps in the dirt, she drinks, carouses, has sex with who she wants”

UNEARTH THE SECRETS OF AREA X

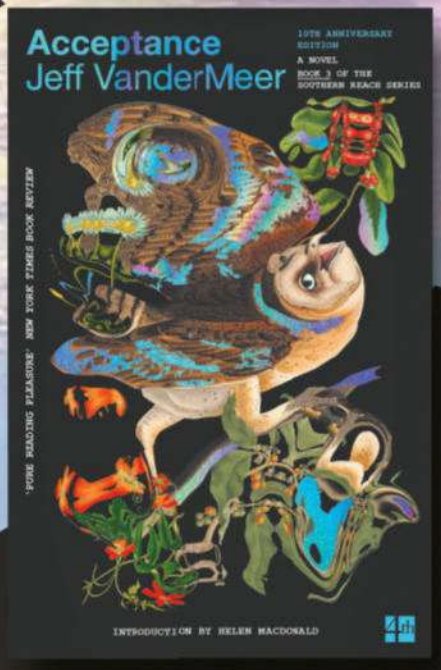
IN THE *SOUTHERN REACH* SERIES

'Creepy and fascinating'
STEPHEN KING



'Channelling Ballard and Lovecraft to instil the reader with a deep, delicious unease'
FINANCIAL TIMES

'A teeming science fiction that draws on Conrad and Lovecraft alike'
SUNDAY TELEGRAPH



'Immersive, insightful and often deeply bloody creepy'
SFX MAGAZINE

SCAN TO ENTER AREA X

A MUST-READ CLASSIC FOR SCI-FI FANS, OUT NOW.

4th

HOLIDAY SPECIAL 2024

Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 80 | TV 84 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 88 | BOOKS 94 | COMICS 100 | GAMES & STUFF 102

THIS ISSUE 57 REVIEWS

80

WICKED
Return To Oz

Highlights

84

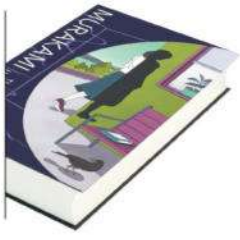
AGATHA ALL ALONG

→ Expect mystery, weird imagery and a *lot* of singing from the *WandaVision* spin-off.

91

BLAKE'S 7

→ The intergalactic freedom fighters' battle with the tyrannical Federation comes to HD.



94

THE CITY AND ITS UNCERTAIN WALLS

→ More magical realism from Haruki Murakami.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

WICKED

Satisfying Gravity

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 160 minutes

Director **Jon M Chu**

Cast **Ariana Grande, Cynthia Erivo, Jeff Goldblum, Jonathan Bailey, Michelle Yeoh, Marissa Bode**

Adapting any musical – especially one that's been as wildly successful as *Wicked* – is a huge challenge. And it's one that Jon M Chu's new film (at least in this first chunk, with the second part due next year) rises to meet in spectacular fashion.

Fans who are well acquainted with witchy duo Glinda (Ariana Grande) and Elphaba (Cynthia Erivo) will certainly find plenty to enjoy, with familiar beats, songs and jokes all present and correct. But Chu's film is also careful not to alienate newcomers.

It's drawn, like the show, from Gregory Maguire's book – and thoughtfully expanded with more of the novel's edge by stage book writer Winnie Holzman and *Cruella* screenwriter Dana Fox. *Wicked* is still the story of *The Wizard Of Oz*'s magical pair, who meet at university and go on to very different paths in life, all wrapped up with the arrival of a certain farm girl from Kansas who shakes things up (only nodded to here).

The musical touches on the slow burn rise of authoritarianism, the useful tool of othering as a method of fear and control, and the challenges faced by outsiders. The film's expanded length, however – this first offering alone runs to two hours and 40 minutes, whereas the musical is two hours and 45, including a 15-minute intermission – adds thematic depth. There's also additional dialogue crackling with comedy and drama while still feeling of a piece with the source, and even two very recognisable, crowd-pleasing cameos.

Grande and Erivo keep your focus, though, embodying their characters with dynamism, flair and heart. Grande is eccentric privilege embodied, an excited Dachshund eager to get your attention and then grumpy when she doesn't get her way.

Erivo has a stillness and a grit that works for Elphaba, the green-hued magic user who will eventually become seen as a curse for all of Oz, even if that's only when seen from a certain point of view. The likes of Jeff Goldblum (in full Gold-bloom), Michelle Yeoh, *Bridgerton*'s Jonathan Bailey and relative newcomer Marissa Bode all add different flavours to the proceedings.

Chu, meanwhile, who has flitted between genres including romcom, heist film and action movie, really seems to soar when he's allowed to let his musical flag fly, working with production designer Nathan Crowley and his team to craft sets that nod to the stage production but also feel fantastical – practical construction merging seamlessly with digital magic. You can believe this is the same world as the 1939 take on Oz, but this film also clearly asserts its own identity.

> **Grande and Erivo embody their characters with dynamism, flair and heart**

Wrapping up with a goosebump-raising rendition of first-act showstopper "Defying Gravity" as Elphaba soars off to challenge the forces aligning against her, this (assuming *Part II* sticks the landing) has all the makings of a superior musical movie moment. **James White**

"Pink and green should always be seen."

i With Chu pushing to shoot practically wherever possible, nine million tulips were planted for the Munchkinland set.

NIGHTBITCH

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 6 DECEMBER

12 | 98 minutes

Director **Marielle Heller**

Cast **Amy Adams, Scoot McNairy, Zoë Chao, Mary Holland**

Having a baby is hard. There are late nights, nappies, messes to be cleaned up, repetitive domestic tasks to be endured... and also films about the experience that seem to believe they are the first piece of art to have noticed how hard it is.

Nightbitch is one of these films, filled with tired clichés and montages of women struggling with weaning and missing their once high-flying careers while their husbands are oblivious to their hardships.

Marielle Heller's movie does have one ace card up its sleeve: her protagonist, played by Amy Adams, is also convinced that she's turning into a dog, and is growing fur and extra nipples, and craving meat. But even with this added layer of whimsy *Nightbitch* still feels like a stale treat, one whose satirical attack lacks any specifics.

Adams is a phenomenal actress; playing an installation artist turned stay-at-home parent, she's adept at selling the exhaustion and also landing the occasional zinger when chatting to her fellow mums after a baby music class.

All the same, *Nightbitch* fails to provide any fresh insight into motherhood, domesticity or the creative process. For a film with such a wild concept it's executed in a very bland and conventional manner; ironically the story would have been better served if it allowed itself to go feral. **Leila Latif**

RUMOURS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 6 DECEMBER
15 | 104 minutes
Directors **Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Galen Johnson**
Cast **Cate Blanchett, Roy Dupuis, Nikki Amuka-Bird, Charles Dance**

Set against Guy Maddin's previous work, much of it inspired by silent cinema, shot on Super 8, or best suited to galleries, *Rumours* looks rather *straight*. It stars people you've heard of, and has a more Odeon-friendly sheen. Yet it remains one of 2024's most downright peculiar movies.

After summit staff disappear, the G7 leaders are left alone in the grounds of a chateau, stumbling upon reanimated bog bodies and, inexplicably, a gigantic brain. You could call it a satirical apocalypse, but we're not in *Don't Look Up* territory here. While sport is had with the hollow banality of political language, *Rumours* is more of a surrealist shaggy-dog story.

The cast includes Cate Blanchett as the German Chancellor and Charles Dance as the US President. Rolando Ravello's Italian leader proves the most charming, thanks to his guileless idiocy.

The narrative arc is pretty underwhelming: the leaders tramp through the woods to a ferry point, then tramp back again. There are wry touches – a set of summit goody bags containing *Incumbent Life* magazine and potassium cyanide tablets raises a smile.

But the non-sequiturs and bathos don't provide any belly laughs. And while the lack of explanation is clearly deliberate devilment, the whole exercise feels a little like a joke missing a punchline. **Calvin Baxter**

New IG post: "Felt cute, might delete later."

YOUR MONSTER

Coming out of the closet

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 104 minutes
Director **Caroline Lindy**
Cast **Melissa Barrera, Tommy Dewey, Edmund Donovan, Meghann Fahy**

Turns out *Joker: Folie à Deux* isn't the only horror-adjacent movie to dust off the Broadway standard "Put On A Happy Face" this year.

Caroline Lindy's monster romance drops the needle on the original Dick Van Dyke version right at the beginning: would-be actress Laura is leaving hospital after surgery, having just found out that her theatre director boyfriend has dumped her.

Apparently her cancer treatment was distracting him from his career – and in case that act of romantic terrorism wasn't cruel enough, he's also recast her role in his new production. Wallowing in heartbreak and jealousy (plus, you know, recovering from cancer), Laura moves back into her childhood home. And that's where she meets her monster. Turns out, the creature that used to lurk under her bed has been chilling in her closet this whole time. The two of them initially annoy one another, but since this is, after all, a romcom, that irritation soon turns to attraction. Seems there are benefits to dating a monster...

> **"By turns funny, charming and enraging"**

By turns funny, charming and enraging, *Your Monster* is as heartfelt as it is righteously furious about bad boyfriends (and bad friends). Melissa Barrera, best known to genre fans for her role as Sam Carpenter in *Scream* and *Scream VI*, is almost unrecognisable here: initially a sad girl weeping into her Chinese takeaway, she gradually rediscovers her voice... and sings her heart out.

Some viewers will find the Monster's *Buffy*-esque prosthetics a little goofy, but that might well be the point. The whole film's a little goofy – but all the more loveable for it. **Sarah Dobbs**

i *Your Monster* started out as a short film; that starred *Orange Is The New Black*'s Kimiko Glenn as the female lead.

THE UNIVERSAL THEORY

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 13 DECEMBER
15 | 118 minutes
Director **Timm Kröger**
Cast **Jan Bülow, Olivia Ross, Hanns Zischler, Gottfried Breitfuss**

This enigmatic German-language thriller is unlike anything you're likely to have seen in a cinema over the last few decades.

It's 1962 and Johannes Leinert (Jan Bülow) is a promising young physicist who attends a conference in the Swiss Alps. He has some intriguing theories about the nature of the universe – or perhaps *multiverse*. Soon, however, he finds himself tangled up in a mystery involving a beautiful woman, a series of strange deaths, and something dangerous within the heart of the mountains.

Timm Kröger's film has a striking aesthetic, somewhere between a classic Hollywood romance and a Hitchcockian nightmare. Barring a colourful prologue, it's shot entirely in black and white CinemaScope. There's a sweeping grandeur to the visuals, while the score by Diego Ramos Rodriguez drips with old time romance. It's undoubtedly a work of noir pastiche, but an atmospheric one, and it's easy to lose yourself in the uncanny mood.

That's handy, as the plot itself is less effective: basically a string of bizarre incidents that never quite add up to anything. It drags its heels, too – this is a 90-minute movie that sprawls to two hours. Still, it's an unusual and often mesmerising work, and one worth seeing on the big screen. **Will Salmon**

RED ONE

No Claus for celebration

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 123 minutes

Director **Jake Kasdan**

Cast **Dwayne Johnson, Chris Evans, Lucy Liu, JK Simmons**

Given that the shelves of stores have been groaning with festive wares for months, it's perhaps not surprising that this Christmas fantasy made its debut in early November. If *Jumanji*'s Jake Kasdan had hoped to get a jump on Yuletide bonhomie, though, he should have assembled something sturdier than this jarring kedgeree of action, sentiment and ugly CG.

When Santa Claus (a buff JK Simmons) is abducted two days before Christmas Eve, it's left to his head of security Callum (Dwayne Johnson) to track him down with the help of snarky computer hacker Jack O'Malley (Chris Evans). The culprit is soon identified as an evil witch (Kiernan Shipka) with a Scrooge-like distaste for seasonal cheer. Before Callum and Jack can thwart her, though, they must deal with scimitar-wielding snowmen, grumpy demon Krampus (Kristofer Hivju) and, of course, mutual antipathy.

Red One works best when it concentrates on Santa's gift-delivering operation, a well-oiled machine involving reindeer, trolls, polar bears and a secret HQ reminiscent of Wakanda. Once the focus shifts to its bickering co-leads, though, it quickly devolves into a charmless, obnoxious Yule slog.

Neil Smith

i Simmons once worked as a shopping mall Santa, and previously voiced a Santa Claus-like figure in 2019 animation *Klaus*.

VENOM: THE LAST DANCE

Knull and void

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 110 minutes

Director **Kelly Marcel**

Cast **Tom Hardy, Juno Temple, Chiwetel Ejiofor, Rhys Ifans**

Sony's *Venom* trilogy comes to a close with an apparently final instalment that's every bit as resoundingly stupid and intermittently entertaining as the first two. We don't really believe in guilty pleasures – you either like something or you don't – but these films sure come close.

Returned to their own universe after that brief post-credits appearance in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, Eddie (Tom Hardy) and Venom find themselves on the hook for the apparent murder of Detective Mulligan (Stephen Graham). Eddie knows a corrupt judge who might be able to help them out, but he's in New York; cue a protracted cross-country road trip by foot, horse and attaching themselves to the side of an Airbus AC20.

Meanwhile, the evil Knull (Andy Serkis) has despatched an army of symbiote-hunting Xenophages to track down Venom who, it turns out (thanks to some messy plot contrivances), is the key required to release him from space prison.

Such an event will be very bad, apparently, but we never really find out why, as Knull does absolutely knuffin' in this film.

He's presumably being saved up for potential future films, but it's a baffling choice for one of Marvel's greatest villains, and one that robs the movie of any real sense of threat. Instead, Venom lengthily sings along to "Space Oddity" with a hippy family on the way to Area 51, dances with Mrs Chen in Las Vegas, and flees Chiwetel Ejiofor's Rex Strickland – nothing like his counterpart from the comics.

Hardy is as watchable as ever, a note of melancholy creeping into his performance as the film draws to its close, and most of the gags land. But while *The Last Dance* aims to land an emotional wallop in its final moment, it instead delivers a sigh of relief.

Will Salmon

i Both Knull and Rex Strickland are inspired by 2018's run of the *Venom* comic by Donny Cates and artist Ryan Stegman.

FROM THE BESTSELLING MASTER OF MODERN FANTASY

THE FATE OF THE ENTIRE COSMERE HANGS IN THE BALANCE.

THE EPIC NEW STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE BOOK
OUT NOW IN HARDBACK, EBOOK & AUDIO

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **A character has a sudden costume change that wasn't their decision.**
- **Lilia has one of her "moments" (before they're explained, anyway).**

- **Someone sings (or hums) "The Ballad Of The Witches' Road".**
- **Wanda/the Scarlet Witch gets a name check.**
- **Someone says the word "sigil".**
- **There's a reference to *The Wizard Of Oz*.**

AGATHA ALL ALONG Season One

Spells Like Teen Spirit

★★★★½

UK/US: **Disney+, streaming now**

Showrunner **Jac Schaeffer**

Cast **Kathryn Hahn, Joe Locke, Aubrey Plaza, Sasheer Zamata, Ali Ahn**

EPISODES 1.01-1.09 **As any keyboard** warrior will tell you, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has been rubbish since *Endgame*, it's running scared of all that diversity nonsense since *Marvels* nosedived, and now it just pumps out formula guff. Ahem: *Agatha All Along* would like a word.

The MCU's latest TV series stars a bunch of middle- to old-age women and a gay teen, in a story that starts as a *Mare Of Easttown* pastiche before becoming a blend of *Hellraiser*, *The Wizard Of Oz* and *Witches Got Talent*. The result is all kinds of fantastic – definitely the most gloriously insane MCU series since the one that spawned it, courtesy of returning showrunner Jac Schaeffer.

Agatha All Along is the sequel/spin-off/bastard child of *WandaVision*, spotlighting coven-killing wiccan supervillain Agatha Harkness (Kathryn Hahn), who created the sitcom world of Westview to entrap Wanda Maximoff in the original series. That ended badly, you may recall, with Wanda's hubby Vision and twin kids as collateral damage.

Now powerless and amnesiac, Agatha is under a curse herself, living an imaginary life as a police detective. But then a mysterious Teen (*Heartstopper*'s Joe Locke, looking like he's having a whale of a time) reawakens the real, crazy-ass Agatha.

Teen demands to be taken on the legendary Witches' Road in search of power. Agatha agrees to take him there, but first she needs a coven, assembled from any washed-up witches she can find in the neighbourhood. Making the mission ever more perilous are a vengeful sect of supernatural nasties called the Salem Seven, and Agatha's creepy ex, Rio.

Agatha All Along is definitely an acquired taste. It's often loud, brash and camp. The sequence in which all the main characters are transformed into famous Disney witches, including Teen as Maleficent ("If the cheekbones fit..."), is probably a good litmus test for whether this show's for you. But it's difficult not to admire the sheer craft and imagination that's gone into the making of it.

It's not so much a puzzle box mystery as a Rubik's Cube enigma that not only rewards but practically demands repeated viewings, with plots and subplots in some kind of erratic quantum entanglement. There are scary moments, heartrending revelations and an unsettling underlying amorality that offsets the hijinks. Just when the series does appear to be settling into a formula, it skews everything with two game-changing flashback episodes and a metaphysical time travel episode that feels genuinely original, and fresh, and touching.

The lead performances are all magnificent (special shout-out to Patti LuPone, who brings real dignity to divination witch Lilia) and it's a rich visual feast full of memorable, evocative and downright weird images.

Oh, and there's an awful lot of singing involved – prepare to be seriously earwormed. **Dave Golder**

i In episode seven, one of the falling swords is actually Conan's Atlantean sword from *Conan The Barbarian* (1982).

CITADEL: HONEY BUNNY

From Asia With Love

★★★★☆

UK/US **Prime Video, streaming now**
Showrunners **Raj & DK**
Cast **Samantha Ruth Prabhu, Kashvi Majmundar, Varun Dhawan, Kay Kay Menon**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **First the good** news: you don't need to have seen the first two *Citadel* series to enjoy this one. Which is handy, since the Russo Brothers' sprawling, ambitious spy franchise has been a bit dull so far, while *Honey Bunny* is all kinds of fun.

This is the Indian take on the material, but despite the cutesy title it doesn't go full Bollywood. Directed by current doyens of Indian action movies Raj & DK, it's a surprisingly hardboiled thriller that acts as a prequel to the main show.

Cutting back and forth between two timelines – 1992 and 2000 – it's the story of an actor, Honey, who becomes involved with a stuntman, Bunny, who's moonlighting as a secret agent. But Honey's introduction into the world of espionage creates cracks within the well-oiled team, and the fallout is still impacting on Honey's life years later when she's forced to go on the run with her daughter. That's the daughter who will grow up to be the original series' Nadia.

> **"Despite the cutesy title it doesn't go full Bollywood"**

"Love you, Honey!" "No, I'm Bunny. Aren't I?"

As much a love story as a spy thriller, *Honey Bunny* is a complex, character-led drama that just happens to have some impressive and innovative action scenes – a few of them presented via elaborate single tracking shots.

And while it may be a little outlandish, it's also an intriguing examination of what draws people to gang culture, and that moment when someone starts to wonder, "Hang on, are we the bad guys?" It may make you want to seek out more Raj & DK movies too.

Dave Golder

ℹ In the original idea for the series, *Citadel*'s Priyanka Chopra (Nadia) would have featured in the later timeline.

MRS DAVIS

Nun more bizarre

★★★★½

UK **ITVX, streaming now**
US **Peacock, streaming now**
Creators **Damon Lindelof, Tara Hernandez**
Cast **Betty Gilpin, Jake McDorman, Andy McQueen, Chris Diamantopoulose**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Is *Mrs Davis*** 2023's most undeservedly underrated show? Despite some impressive creative pedigree in the form of *Lost* and *Watchmen* showrunner Damon Lindelof and former *The Big Bang Theory* writer Tara Hernandez, the series came and went more or less unnoticed in the US. That's a shame, but given its rather unique premise, it's not entirely surprising.

Betty Gilpin plays Sister Simone, a nun who is one of only a very few people left on Earth opposed to Mrs Davis – the benevolent and all-powerful AI that has ended war and famine, and seemingly brought prosperity to the world. Simone, however, blames the AI for the death of her father and refuses to talk to "Her". But then Mrs Davis makes an offer she can't refuse: if Simone finds and retrieves the Holy Grail, the AI will switch itself off, permanently.

It's not the easiest elevator pitch, and the show only gets weirder and more convoluted from there. Rather than a *Black Mirror*-esque dystopian thriller, *Mrs Davis* is a broadly comic shaggy dog story that quickly takes in secret societies, a desert island castaway, a doppelganger of the Pope, and more.

The twists and turns come so thick and fast that it's easy to lose track of the significance of – for example – a subplot about a trainer commercial, but the show handles everything so deftly that you always feel like you're in a safe pair of hands.

"Let's not make a habit of –" "Don't you dare."

Gilpin and Jake McDorman – who plays Simone's ex-boyfriend Wiley, dragged along for the ride but with secrets of his own – are also both terrific, ably mixing the laughs with tenderness and quite a bit of warmth.

There's real depth, too. As bizarre as *Mrs Davis* frequently is, it's musing on the same themes of faith, science, obsession and delusion that powered both *Lost* and Lindelof's masterpiece, *The Leftovers*. There's just more jokes and exploding heads this time.

Will Salmon

ℹ Episode titles were AI-generated, hence "The Final Intercut: So I'm Your Horse" and "Great Gatsby 2001: A Space Odyssey".

BEFORE

The Delusional Suspects

★★★☆☆

- UK/US **Apple+, streaming now, Fridays**
- Creator **Sarah Thorp**
- Cast **Billy Crystal, Jacobi Jupe, Rosie Perez, Maria Dizzia**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **As a psychological** horror, this series does so many things right. It's edgy. It's unnerving. It's atmospheric. It's exquisitely acted. It has a slowburn pace. It rations its gorier shocks for maximum effect, and then executes them with visceral relish. There's just one major problem: there's barely enough plot here for a 90-minute movie, and you can only stretch out a meagre premise so far before minor issues start to become increasingly irritating.

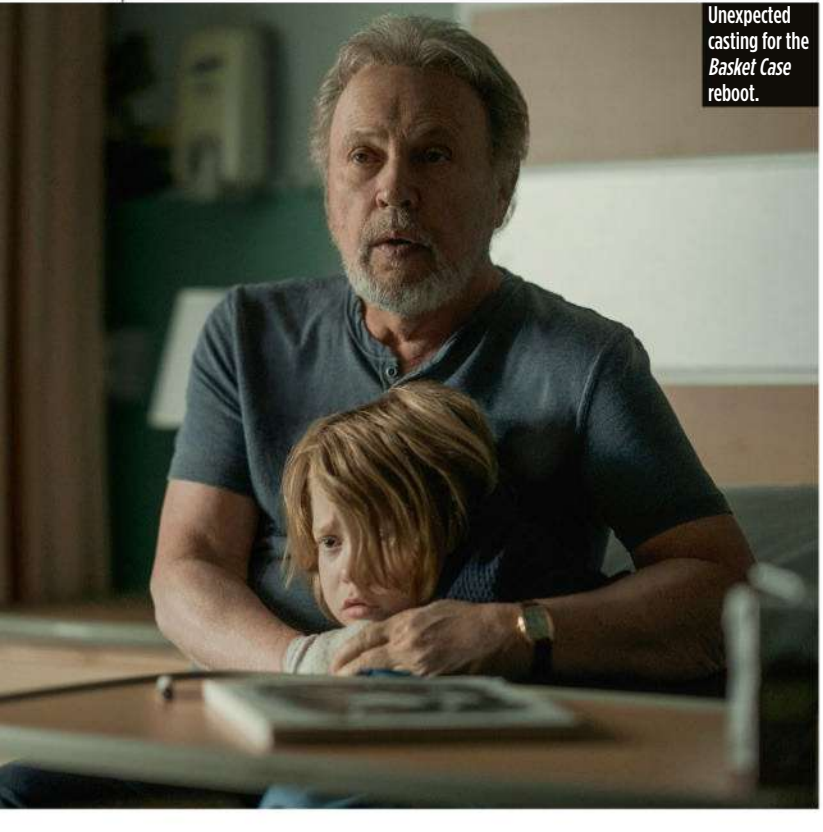
Billy Crystal plays child psychologist Eli, who's just lost his wife to suicide and is on the cusp of retiring. Then an intriguing new case arrives at his doorstep. Literally. He opens his front door one day to find a small boy scratching great chunks out of the woodwork.

The boy runs off, but soon after Eli is asked to cast his expert eye over a disturbed orphan, Noah, who's rapidly working his way through foster parents. Eli's not interested until he learns that it's the same boy who'd been gouging his door. Are the two of them connected in some way?

The boy is clearly subject to hallucinations, and soon Eli starts experiencing them too – including worms crawling under the boy's skin. Is this a case of shared delusion or something more supernatural? Putting his job and his sanity at risk, Eli becomes convinced that the answers may be connected to his dead wife.

Crystal is brilliant, especially since Eli isn't written as the most sympathetic character. As Eli starts vanishing down a rabbit hole and – to those around him – apparently losing his grip on reality, Crystal convinces you that Eli's story is worth investing your time in. Stylish direction and some deeply weird imagery also keep things interesting, and the series has some new tricks to play with that old dramatic chestnut: is it real or all an illusion?

Sadly, there's just way too much padding, some of it downright bizarre. One cliffhanger – played out like it's a big revelation – involves Eli ripping open Noah's shirt to reveal something that's been clearly visible in a photo which we've seen several times previously. Many episodes appear to have only one significant step forward in plot terms, and there are far too many cyclical conversations and repeated plot beats. The series at times feels not so much slowburn as in danger of freezing over.



Unexpected casting for the *Basket Case* reboot.

> **There's barely enough plot here for a 90-minute movie**

All of which may have been more palatable if the central mystery delivered a jawdropping denouement. It doesn't. It's fine. It does the job.

But it feels like a lot of other "ghost" stories you've seen or read before, and somewhat of a damp squib after such an over-egged build-up. And the use of modern psychoanalytical buzz phrases don't really paper over the cracks.

Dave Golder

i The hallway carpet from the Overlook Hotel (from Kubrick's *The Shining*) makes a cameo appearance in the final episode.

PANTHEON

Season One

★☆☆☆☆

- UK **Netflix, streaming now**
- US **Prime Video, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Craig Silverstein**
- Cast **Katie Chang, Paul Dano, Aaron Eckhart, Daniel Dae Kim**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Making a very** belated arrival here after its 2022 premiere Stateside, this AMC Studios animation is a tale of transhumanism and the quest for immortality.

The story begins with teenager Maddie receiving anonymous online messages which appear to be from her father, whom she believed dead. Simultaneously, rival tech companies are in a race to perfect Uploaded Intelligence, whereby memories and personalities are stripped from a living brain and transformed into a disembodied digital presence preserved online. Like a ghost in the shell, if you will.

Though *Pantheon* was based on a series of short stories by Ken Liu, it's impossible not to compare it with Masamune Shirow's classic manga and Mamoru Oshii's remarkable 1995 feature film. But the comparison is an unflattering one for *Pantheon*. Oshii's film pushed the boundaries of animation, next to which *Pantheon* looks drab and pedestrian. The pace is sluggish, and the scripts are monotonal – everyone sounds miserable and depressed, and everything is awful.

The scale of the threat posed grows significantly across the eight episodes, but the series substitutes technobabble for any serious examination of the implications of transhumanism.

David West

GROTESQUERIE

Season One

Murphy's Gore

★★★½☆

UK **Disney+, streaming now**
US **Hulu, streaming now**
Creator **Ryan Murphy**
Cast **Niecy Nash, Micaela Diamond, Courtney B Vance, Nicholas Alexander Chavez**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **The info page on** Disney+ really doesn't prepare you for what you're in for with Ryan Murphy's latest horror show.

The serial killer mystery has an 18+ rating, with warnings for "Fear, Violence, Coarse Language". They're not kidding about the violence – they could have added adjectives like "stomach-churning" – but you should also be prepared for lots of disgusting eating noises, and at least two moments that'll make you get off your sofa and bawl at the screen.

Detective Lois Tryon is the unfortunate cop investigating the horror here. She's got plenty on her plate before the titular killer shows up, with a husband in a coma, a daughter trying to get on reality TV, and a drinking problem.

But then the titular serial killer starts putting together horrible quasi-religious murder tableaux, and Lois has no choice but to pit her wits against his. Her only real ally is Sister Megan, a true-crime-loving nun/journalist who might be a little too close to the killer...

American Horror Stories fans will be familiar with the Grand Guignol-style dramatics Murphy indulges. To his credit, after the shock value of the first few crime scenes wears off, a kind of creeping apocalyptic dread sets in; episode four, set in a town on the verge of being swallowed up by a fiery sinkhole, is genuinely scary.

Things do get a bit silly in the later episodes. Bringing in NFL player Travis Kelce is a risky bit of stunt casting that just about works, while the revelation at the end of episode seven is a make-or-break moment: you'll either embrace the chaos or switch your TV off.

Ending on a cliffhanger feels particularly cruel, since no second season has (at time of writing) been greenlit. But ultimately, Ryan Murphy is gonna Ryan Murphy; *Grotesquerie* won't be to everyone's taste, but if you've got the guts for it, there's plenty to get your teeth into here. **Sarah Dobbs**

"Stop, or the nun will play the tambourine."

i The in-car singalong scene in episode four was added specifically to show off Micaela Diamond's musical theatre chops.

THE FRANCHISE

Season One

Taking the super out of heroes

★★★☆☆

UK **Sky Comedy, streaming now**
US **Max, streaming now**
Showrunner **Jon Brown**
Cast **Himesh Patel, Jessica Hynes, Richard E Grant, Daniel Brühl**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **The movie** industry is famously such a hot mess of chaos, poor decision-making, exploitation and financial waste that it was bound to come onto satire-meister Armando Iannucci's radar sooner or later.

In collaboration with Bond director Sam Mendes and scriptwriter Jon Brown (*Misfits*, *Succession*, *Dead Pixels*) – who's actually the main writer on the series – he's set his sights specifically on superhero franchises; the MCU in particular. It's never actually named, but the parallels aren't subtle. In fact, there's very little that's subtle about *The Franchise*.

Himesh Patel stars as the stoic first assistant director on a beleaguered second-rung entry (think *Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania* level) in a franchise that's rapidly going down the plughole, dealing with a pretentious director (Daniel Brühl), a studio that keeps making cost-cutting decisions at the last minute, a stroppy old luvvie (Richard E Grant) for a villain, and a delicate man-child for a star.

The technical crew members are worked to the bone, social media is savaging everything they do, and the film will probably get shelved anyway.

There are moments when *The Franchise* is very funny and very sharp, and it certainly lays bare the worst excesses of blockbuster filmmaking. But it's also a hard show to totally embrace. Its targets are often low-hanging fruit, and there's a mean-spirited feel to it.

The characters are uniformly stupid or self-seeking skin-sacks of idiosyncrasies, played by actors who appear to have been told "Just do your usual schtick." It's almost ironic that a show that lampoons movies for being formulaic feels oddly formulaic itself. *The Franchise* is worth a watch for the gags that do work, but you can't help feeling that it could have been so much more marvellous. **Dave Golder**

"Sod it, we'll do it in post-production."

i The pilot episode for *The Franchise* marked the first time that Sam Mendes has ever directed for television.

CRITTERS

Krite Balls Of Fur

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1986-1992 | 15 | Blu-ray

Directors **Stephen Herek, Mick Garris, Kristine Peterson, Rupert Harvey**

Cast **Dee Wallace, Scott Grimes, Aimee Brooks, Don Opper**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If you've never** delved into the *Critters* franchise, imagine *Tremors* crossed with *Gremlins*, with a dash of *Piranha*: smalltown folk taking on toothy furballs that roll like tumbleweeds, and while mischievous, can also fire poisoned quills and strip a man's flesh. This Arrow Video set collects the first four films, which maintain a fairly decent standard.

The 1986 original sees Kansas clan the Browns caught in the crossfire between the ravenous alien Krites and a pair of shapeshifting bounty hunters who never knock on a door when they can blow it to smithereens. Featuring likeably eccentric characters (particularly Don Opper's UFO nut Charlie) and a good mix of humour, heart and action, it's a B-movie gem.

Young Brad Brown (Scott Grimes) returns for *Critters 2*, which just about matches the original. Cranking up the scale, it sees the whole town uniting to take on a veritable swarm of Krites – which, in one neat touch, can now join together to form one giant ball of destruction.

Diminishing returns set in with *Critters 3*, which scales back the ambition, largely confining events to a single run-down apartment building. A young Leonardo DiCaprio impresses as he makes his movie debut, but as our heroes clamber through crawl spaces there's a sense of treading water; there are no fresh ideas here.

The casting coups continue in *Critters IV*, the set's one outright dud. A darker entry set chiefly on a space station in 2045, it boasts Brad Dourif in a rare non-villainous role and a committed performance by Angela Bassett.

The sets impress, but a *Critters* film which (until the last 10 minutes) only supplies two Krites feels like a matter for Trading Standards. What really torpedoes it, however, is a bafflingly minimal score which ensures that key dramatic moments fall flat.

Extras Nearly all the bonuses are borrowed from Shout Factory's 2018 US box set. All four films come with solid retrospectives (of diminishing duration: 71 minutes; 63 minutes; 26 minutes; 23 minutes). Sadly there's no sign of DiCaprio or Bassett, but there are interesting contributions from Critter wranglers the Chiodo Brothers (plus some great design sketches) and Corey Burton, who devised the aliens' voices.

> "Smalltown folk taking on toothy furballs"

You also get a touching remembrance of *Critters* writer Brian Domonic Muir (22 minutes) and behind-the-scenes footage from the first two entries (12 minutes/24 minutes) – including priceless glimpses of the crew manoeuvring that giant Critter ball. Also carried over are six commentary tracks by cast and crew (the first two films get a pair each).

Arrow's set adds an additional jovial commentary for every film by a double act from website The Schlock Pit. Plus: *Critters*' alternate ending; additional scenes from *Critters 2*'s TV cut; galleries; trailers; TV spots; a 60-page booklet; four posters. **Ian Berriman**

How to train your critter: lots of electricity.

i Critters voicer Corey Burton riffed on the French word "manger" when they're hungry, so they say something like "ange".

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS IN WONDERLAND

★★★★½

RELEASED 13 DECEMBER 2024 | TBC | SVOD

Director **Peter Baynton**

Cast **Gerard Butler, Emilia Clarke, Simone Ashley, Mae Muller**

SKY CINEMA **Mash together** *Alice's Adventures In Wonderland*, Clement Clarke Moore's festive poem "A Visit From St Nicholas" and a bunch of cheery songs by Guy Chambers (best known for his work with Robbie Williams) and what do you get? A lovely time, that's what!

Adapted from Carys Bexington's illustrated book, *The Night Before Christmas In Wonderland* follows St Nick (Gerard Butler) as he visits Wonderland and falls foul of the wicked, Christmas-hating Queen Of Hearts (Emilia Clarke, loving the chance to yell "Off with his head!"). All the seasonal staples are present and correct – reindeer, elves and sleighs – but with an added wacky Lewis Carroll edge.

The Queen's song about the Bandersnatch is a banger. Sure, Butler's singing won't win him any Grammys, but he's having so much fun that it doesn't matter. Dialogue is delivered in rhyme and everything's knowingly British – there are jokes about late Christmas post, while one reindeer travels to Wonderland on the Tube via Farringdon. It's *that* silly.

Little kids are going to love this, while the adults watching with them may be unexpectedly entranced. Its only downside? The Cheshire cat doesn't get enough screen time. **Jayne Nelson**

TANK GIRL

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1995 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Rachel Talalay**

Cast **Lori Petty, Naomi Watts, Malcolm McDowell, Ice-T**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Supplying the** cover star of *SFX* issue one way back in 1995, *Doctor Who* director Rachel Talalay's adaptation of the Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett comic was tinkered with by the studio and bombed at the time, but has picked up a robust cult following in the decades since.

Lori Petty's take on the character is an explosion of anarchic fun – it's hard to imagine Margot Robbie's Harley Quinn without Petty's Rebecca Buck first. The plot (Tank Girl sets out to take down Malcolm McDowell's water-hoarding despot Kesslee) is a load of kangaroo balls, but that's okay, as the comics rarely had plots anyway.

It's also tonally all over the place, the repeated threats of sexual violence sitting uneasily with the madcap humour. Still, it's such a singularly weird film that you can't help but admire its attitude.

Extras A new interview with artist Greg Staples (12 minutes) is accompanied by a pair of video essays (19 minutes/10 minutes). Carried over from the previous Blu-ray are a commentary by Talalay and Petty and interviews with Petty (23 minutes), Talalay (24 minutes), Doug Jones (a mutant kangaroo here – 12 minutes) and production designer Catherine Hardwicke (18 minutes). Plus: an archival Making of (five minutes); trailer. The Limited Edition has a 60-page booklet. **Will Salmon**

THE BOX OF DELIGHTS

Simply splendiferous

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1984 | PG | Blu-ray

Director **Renny Rye**

Cast **Devin Stanfield, Patrick Troughton, Robert Stephens**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The televisual** equivalent of mince pies and mulled wine, this six-part take on John Masefield's children's novel is still, for many, a regular fixture of the advent countdown.

Set at Christmas 1934, it follows young Kay (Devin Stanfield), who after meeting a mysterious Punch and Judy man (Patrick Troughton) is entrusted with a magical box that can shrink you *Borrowers*-style, or send you flying at high speed – a device coveted by the sinister Abner Brown (Robert Stephens).

Plot-wise, it's a run-around: a series of "scrobblings", as Abner's henchmen snatch locals via their flying car, interspersed with dreamlike flights of fancy. And the serial's blend of video effects and animation looks quaint today.

But the real magic here is the twinkle in Troughton's eye, which surpasses any Quantel Paintbox trickery. Stephens is equally magnificent, providing an Olympian display of oversized acting. The cold glare, bared teeth and venomous enunciation make for an unforgettable villain. Anyone with a fondness for antediluvian vocabulary, meanwhile, will be in hog heaven.

Extras New documentary *Time And Tide* (101 minutes) is a triumph; a locations featurette, retrospective and commentary all rolled into one, it's worth the asking price in its own right.

Doctor Who fans will recognise the format from the Blu-ray box sets: Stanfield and director Renny Rye go on a locations jaunt, fond reminiscences prompted by handing them on-set photos. Given the series' array of scenic settings, this works very well. As the doc walks through the series in order, another 23 interviewees pop up; an appearance by the *real* Punch and Judy performer and his puppets is a special treat.

Plus: a 2004 Rye and Stanfield interview; trailers and continuity announcements; clips from shows like *Blue Peter*. **Ian Berriman**

i Julian Sands loved the book, and begged for a part. He has one line, as a Greek soldier (with a northern accent).

SPELLBOUND

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | PG | SVOD

Director **Vicky Jenson**

Cast **Rachel Zegler, John Lithgow, Nicole Kidman, Javier Bardem**

NETFLIX **Parents are always** embarrassing to teenagers, but Princess Ellian (Rachel Zegler) has every other 15-year-old beaten. *Her* mum and dad have been turned into huge, lumbering monsters by a spell, which means that the distinguished king and queen, confined to their palace, now spend their days chewing everything in sight and pooping a lot.

Eventually Ellian is told that her parents are effectively gone and she must take their place as Queen. Distraught, she sets out on a quest to reverse the spell, alongside her pet hamster, who has just body-swapped with John Lithgow's fussy court attendant. (Keep up.)

Along the way she partakes in a selection of song-and-dance numbers that may feel familiar – this is a Skydance production, not Disney, but with a score by Alan Menken and with John Lasseter producing, it's hard not to see Mouse House beats all the way through. A few of the songs will leave you humming refrains from *Beauty And The Beast*.

This isn't a bad thing; with so much about this magical land feeling familiar, it's easy to get drawn into Ellian's quest with all its cute critters, inventive animated sequences and surprisingly modern themes. Will *Spellbound* prove to be as timeless as the films that inspired it? Nope, but it's hard to dislike its innocent, bubbly energy. **Jayne Nelson**

THE STONE TAPE

If these walls could talk

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 9 DECEMBER

1972 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Peter Sasdy**

Cast **Michael Bryant, Jane Asher, Michael Bates, Iain Cuthbertson**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **First broadcast** on Christmas Day 1972, this characteristically intelligent chiller from Nigel Kneale has become a key artefact of what we consider the hauntological '70s, defining that decade's signature intersection of analogue tech with the paranormal.

Impressively upscaled for this new Blu-ray, Kneale's TV play has a compelling concept at its heart, explaining ghosts as moments of extreme emotion, embedded in the walls of a building. Shot on videotape, it has an immediacy that belies the fact it's now over half a century old, while old-school electronic effects and the sounds of the Radiophonic Workshop lend a uniquely BBC flavour of the uncanny.

It's creepiest in its quietest moments, in the malevolent stillness of empty rooms. It's a pity that leading man Michael Bryant's shouty, histrionic performance so often shatters that precious ambience, bringing all the subtlety of a machine gun at a séance.

Extras An enjoyable retrospective assembles an impressive roster of contributors from star Jane Asher to Mark Gatiss, and also touches on the origins of the "stone tape" theory itself (42 minutes).

Elsewhere Kneale biographer Andy Murray takes an atmospheric trip to the writer's homeland of the Isle of Man, complete with an all-too-tantalising glimpse of the Kneale archive (15 minutes). There's a new audio commentary from writers Jon Dear and Sean Hogan, along with the original DVD commentary by Kim Newman and Kneale himself, who's often content to let what's on screen play out in silence. This Limited Edition release comes with the script and a booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

> **"Kneale's TV play has a compelling concept at its heart"**

"Oh Christ, I think I've left the iron *and* the oven on."

ⓘ Exteriors for the central house were shot at Horsley Towers in Surrey, once home to mathematician Ada Lovelace.

BLACK CAB

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **Set largely in the** titular vehicle, after a cabbie kidnaps a dysfunctional couple, this economical horror puts a dark twist on the "cuddly bear" persona of Nick Frost, whose slippages from jovial bantz into psychopathic menace impress. This bear could rip you apart.

Presenting initially as a taut serial killer thriller, it stumbles when integrating a supernatural dimension involving a ghostly hitcher. The cabbie's motivation, once revealed, makes little sense, and the full circle ending is a head-scratcher. **Ian Berriman**

MORTUARY

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1982 | 15 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **A svelte young** Bill Paxton and embalming tool kills are the main draws of this clumsily scripted slasher.

Despite a poster suggesting a "buried alive" theme, it centres on a woman who suspects her dad's drowning was murder, stalked by a hooded figure.

Freighted with red herrings sure to make you feel cheated, it's a nonsensical affair, whose writer doesn't seem to grasp what a séance is (*not* a bunch of folk prancing about in robes).

Extras Commentary; composer interview; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

EYEBALL

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1975 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray/DVD

A busload of American tourists in Barcelona are stalked by a maniac who extracts eyeballs in this giallo/slasher hybrid from Umberto Lenzi. Why they don't all simply fly home after the second murder is the biggest mystery.

Expect soapy character dynamics, dramatic zooms, and plenty of gratuitous boobs. You have zero chance of guessing the killer, but the reveal is so shamelessly ludicrous that it guarantees a guffaw.

Extras Three commentaries; two interviews; visual essay; locations visit; more. **Ian Berriman**

MONSTER SUMMER

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 12 | Download

There's a distinct whiff of wannabe Amblin in this lightweight horror, in which a group of BMX-riding kids investigate a witchy presence in the woods of Martha's Harbour. For once it's the '90s rather than the '80s, but the *Stranger Things* vibe is clear.

It's an amiable, undemanding watch, big on overfamiliar tropes and short on genuinely memorable thrills, not to mention monsters. Mel Gibson provides some weathered star power as a reclusive former cop with secrets of his own. **Nick Setchfield**

BLAKE'S 7 Series One

Nation's Seven Army

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1978 | 12 | Blu-ray

Creator **Terry Nation**

Cast **Gareth Thomas, Sally Knyvette, Paul Darrow, Jan Chappell**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **While *Star Trek*** imagined a utopian future of peace and abundance, Dalek creator Terry Nation's *Blake's 7* – the Beeb's nearest equivalent – depicted an Orwellian dystopia: the galaxy beneath the boot of the totalitarian Federation, its heroes a bickering bunch of escaped prisoners turned terrorists. It's enough to make your chest swell with patriotic pride.

If anything, the opening episode plays even darker now, seeing as it has Gareth Thomas's noble rebel leader Blake framed for child abuse. As the crew of the Liberator (a stunning design) slowly comes together, the early episodes certainly hold your attention.

Given how notorious Nation (named on all 13 episodes) was for under-length scripts, quite how credit should be apportioned between him and script editor Chris Boucher is unclear, but as the series progresses you do get a sense of a writer reaching for old tropes as a drowning man clutches at straws. Episode seven delivers Agatha Christie on a spaceship; eight rehashes *Star Trek*'s "Arena".

The show's shoestring budget can let it down: we challenge anyone to watch "The Web" without snorting at a pint-sized alien achieved by inserting an actor's head into a tank of water, photo-board on Clacton Pier style. Yet generally it still stands up, thanks to well-delineated characters and good casting. Michael Keaton's cowardly thief Vila is as adept at unlocking your heart as he is doors, while Paul Darrow steals the show as borderline sociopath Avon, always ready to fire a withering barb

Elsewhere, Jacqueline Pearce and Stephen Greif pitch glamorous Federation commander Servalan and her monomaniac underling Travis at just the right level of hissably camp wickedness.

Extras New documentary *Liberation* (85 minutes) places stars Sally Knyvette (Jenna) and Jan Chappell (Cally) in a garden with some rusted props and vino, then canters through the season drawing on both new interviews (another 15) and archival clips. Some stories get shorter shrift, but all receive at least one anecdote.

Matthew Sweet's lengthy sit-downs with Knyvette (78 minutes) and director Michael E Briant (88 minutes) are more interested in drawing out their subjects' character then eliciting chalk pit anecdotes (in both, 45 minutes pass before Blake's name is heard). Briant's animated enthusiasm makes his – which encompasses polio, life as a child star and bankruptcy – particularly engaging, while Knyvette's paints her as something of a rebel herself, having rejected a middle-class upbringing. A touching Stephen Greif tribute (35 minutes) draws on contributions from family and friends, plus a 2021 Zoom chat.

You also get optional CG effects, four '90s convention panels (205 minutes), and part one of Kevin Jon Davies shelved '90s doc *The Making Of Blake's 7* (42 minutes). Sadly so many of its talking heads were cannibalised for the new doc that this is a frustrating watch. Also new: 12 minutes of studio footage from "Orac"; a *Swap Shop* clip; model footage, galleries, script PDFs. Various DVD extras are also carried over. **Ian Berriman**

> **Paul Darrow steals the show as sociopath Avon**

i One early idea was for alien telepath Cally to have red skin, with the actor also wearing black contact lenses.

TOMIE

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1998 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Ataru Oikawa**

Cast **Mami Nakamura, Miho Kanno, Yoriko Douguchi, Tomorowo Taguchi**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Inspired by Junji** Ito's debut manga from 1987, this film adaptation is probably not what you'd expect given Ito's propensity for eye-popping Lovecraftian body horror.

It may make better sense to call it a sequel, as it's all about the aftermath. Mami Nakamura is 20-year-old Tsukiko, who's struggling to recover memories of what turns out to be the bloody chaos unleashed by classmate Tomie (Miho Kanno).

This young beauty has seductive powers which drive all the men around her to acts of brutal violence – including her own destruction. No biggie, as she can regrow herself from a decapitated head...

Very low-key compared to *Uzumaki*, Ataru Oikawa's film has a subdued stillness, utilising gliding camera moves, and immersing you in a soundscape of rainfall or cricket chirps. While both leads are effective, the supporting characters (a cop and a shrink) never feel like anything more than narrative functions. And the twist ending, designed to provoke thought about how we all have a shadow side, is more likely to induce a shrug.

Extras Arrow Video delivers four new bonuses: commentary by *Fangoria* writer Amber T, and interviews with the director, female lead, and producer (totalling 64 minutes) – none of them revelatory. Plus: an archival Making Of (28 minutes); gallery; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

SFX Loves

Sticks and stones

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1999 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Directors **Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez**

Cast **Heather Donahue, Michael Williams, Joshua Leonard**

We feel like this on Zoom meetings as well.

A film about a witch that never actually *shows* said witch. Shot mostly on camcorder. With three unknowns, sent on a trail through the woods by the directors, improvising reactions to nothing more explicit than stick-men and rocks... It really shouldn't have worked. But it did.

Why? Not by fooling people into thinking that they were watching genuine footage of how student filmmakers Heather, Mike and Josh came to a sticky end while shooting a documentary about a Maryland legend. Most viewers were too canny for that.

No, *Blair Witch* worked – and can still elevate the hairs on the back of your neck – because the performances are convincing, and because sometimes the most terrifying thing you can do is to present the unknown, and let the viewer's mind fill in the blanks.

Extras Second Sight's two-disc set has three cuts. The theatrical release was a 35mm transfer. A new remaster rebuilds it from the Hi8 tapes and 16mm elements. Also reconstructed is the slightly longer Festival Cut.

The film's unorthodox shoot and global explosion ensure new doc *The Blair Witch Documentary* (150 minutes) is fascinating. It has some great stories, but what really makes it is the footage shot not only on location but back in the office. You don't just get filmmakers describing their decision-making here – you *see* it.

A staggering 92 minutes of deleted scenes are followed by 16 minutes of B&W B-roll. There's a new critical commentary, and a pseudish visual essay (11 minutes).

Oldies include a commentary, alternate endings, and TV special "Curse Of The Blair Witch" (44 minutes), which uses faux interviews to lay out the backstory. Plus: a 1999 directors' interview (11 minutes); trailers. The Limited Edition adds a 184-page book, a reproduction of Heather's journal, and three art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i The human teeth in the bundle Heather finds were sourced from co-director Eduardo Sanchez's dentist.

THE SLUMBER PARTY MASSACRE

You know the drill

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

1982/1987 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Directors **Amy Holden Jones/ Deborah Brock**

Cast **Michelle Michaels, Robin Stille, Crystal Bernard, Kimberly McArthur**

"Hey girls, why don't we all take our bras off?"

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Though this** slasher and its sequel (also included in this double-bill) were both written and directed by women, and share a focus on female friendship, you couldn't honestly call either film feminist. The first quickly apes the "male gaze" for a high school shower scene, complete with regulation tilt to a soapy butt; in the second, the partying of its girls who just wanna have fun concludes in bra-less pillow fighting.

The original is a pretty by-the-book retread of the *Halloween* template. While not exactly a parody, there's a sense of tongue being placed in cheek. But the killer is unremarkable: just a guy in double denim with a power drill (an obvious phallic symbol). In *Slumber Party Massacre II*, a survivor of the first film's dreams of a leather-clad rocker with a power-drill guitar become a bloody reality. *A Nightmare On Elm Street* was clearly a major influence – something acknowledged via an Officer Kreuger [sic]. Sadly the goofy presentation (including a full-on musical number for the "driller killer") precludes the possibility of any real tension.

Extras Both films come with retrospectives (23 minutes/20 minutes) from 2010. Michael Villella (the original killer) is the standout contributor, detailing a method approach involving movements based on a peacock! Chatty commentaries featuring useful prompting by a superfan date from the same period.

Massacre II gets an extended "Unrated Cut" that periodically shifts into crappy VHS quality, adding 10 minutes of pointless longueurs (like extended driving sequences), *not* extra gore. An oddball interview with supporting actor Riggs Kennedy (13 minutes) turns into a recitation of terrible hippy poetry... Plus: alternate titles; trailers; galleries; booklet.

Ian Berriman

i Director Amy Holden Jones turned down a job editing *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* for the *Slumber Party Massacre* gig.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *AfrAId • Cuckoo • Hellboy: The Crooked Man • Joker: Folie à Deux • Megalopolis • My Old Ass • Never Let Go Salem's Lot • Strange Darling • Timestalker • Transformers One* (Paramount+) *• The Wild Robot*

GODZILLA

Thirty Stories, Seventy Years

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1954 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Ishirō Honda**

Cast **Akira Takarada, Momoko Kōchi, Akihiko Hirata, Takashi Shimura**

As Godzilla's 70th anniversary celebrations continue, here's another chance to toast the health of the grouchy septuagenarian whose debut spawned a genre. You surely know the set-up: H-bomb tests release a towering Cretaceous-era creature, which proceeds to sink shipping and stomp a path through Tokyo.

Godzilla's chubby-thighed sumo waddle is oddly endearing, and his appeal to kiddywinks led to him being softened for later entries. But here's he's an indiscriminate weapon of mass destruction – an orphan-maker. And the series' subtext – the threat of atomic annihilation – is very to the fore.

Not only did nukes unleash Godzilla, but the only means of defeating him is another scientific development with similarly deadly potential, which means that all the marvellous miniature-mangling comes wrapped up in a worthy debate about the rights and wrongs of such research. It's *Oppenheimer* for younglings.

Extras Nothing fresh, sadly: they all stem from Criterion's 2011 DVD (previously raided for their Showa-Era box set).

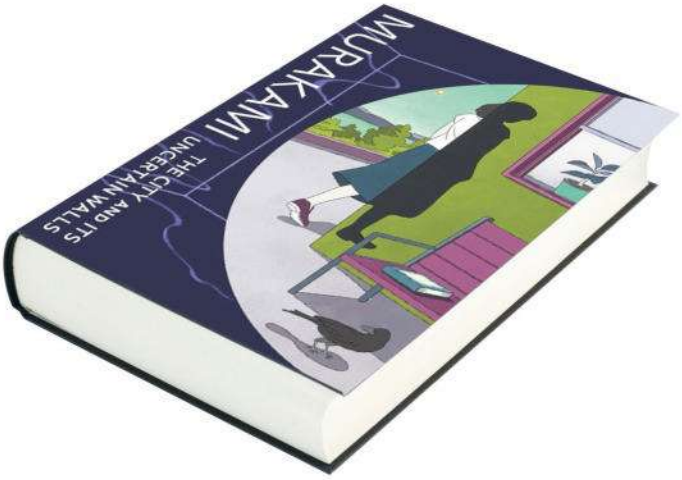
It's a decent spread though, headed by US reworking *Godzilla, King Of The Monsters!*, which inserts *Ironside*'s Raymond Burr as a journalist observing events – an interesting curio. Godzilla expert David Kalat provides respectful commentaries on both versions, heavy on atom age context.

Five cast and crew are interviewed (totalling 104 minutes): the lead, the chap in the monster suit, two effects technicians, and the composer. The latter comes across as a bit of a dude, eruditely elucidating film music theory, fag in hand. A video essay (10 minutes) tells the story of a fishing vessel contaminated by fallout, a key inspiration. An effects piece (nine minutes) focuses on matte paintings and the like. Finally, a Japanese critic supplies general musings (14 minutes). Plus: trailers. **Ian Berriman**

i The Godzilla costume was built on a frame of bamboo wire, with the beast's fiery breath achieved using propane gas.

ROUND UP

There's a deluge of recent movies hitting shiny disc. Set in between the first two films, Fede Alvarez's **ALIEN: ROMULUS** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees young colonists scavenging a drifting space station to escape their dreary existence. Bad move. We said: "As *Alien* movies go, *Romulus* has an above-average intelligence, and a surprisingly big heart." Extras comprise a 25-minute Making Of, deleted scenes, a scene breakdown, and a chat between Alvarez and Ridley Scott. Michael Keaton's "bio-exorcist" makes an extremely belated return in **BEETLEJUICE BEETLEJUICE** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) – and he's still obsessed with Winona Ryder's Lydia, who's called back to her hometown for her father's funeral. We said: "A riot of outlandish jokes, grisly effects and wildly competing plot threads." Extras: commentary by Tim Burton, a Making Of (27 minutes), and another six featurettes (50 minutes). Rebooting the 1994 film, **THE CROW** (out now, 4k/Blu-ray) sees two messed-up kids being murdered after running foul of a crime lord. Bill Skarsgård's Eric then comes back to avenge his sweetheart with a katana. We said: "Has a big, stupid, vulnerable heart... The people who love this film will love it *hard*." Bonuses include a Making Of (66 minutes) and deleted scenes. **GODZILLA MINUS ONE** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) follows a fighter pilot whose attempts to build a new life in post-war Tokyo are interrupted by Godzilla's arrival. We said: "Restores some long overdue gravitas to a cinematic icon." Extras include a 65-minute Making Of, a TV special, VFX breakdowns, and footage from events and talk shows. Based on a 2008 comic series and set in 1959, **HELLBOY: THE CROOKED MAN** (9 December, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees the half-demon hero stranded in an Appalachian small town beset by witches, where an ex-soldier has struck a Faustian bargain with the titular entity. We dug the folk horror vibe, but said: "Jarringly edited, lacking in tension and weirdly uninterested in Hellboy himself." Extras: 116 minutes of interviews and 24 minutes of behind-the-scenes B-roll. Don't expect to see Joaquin Phoenix terrorising Gotham in **JOKER: FOLIE À DEUX** (16 December, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD): this courtroom drama is more of an extended epilogue, with characters debating if Arthur Fleck is mentally fit to be prosecuted. Elsewhere, musical elements come to the fore as he and Lady Gaga's Harley Quinn imagine themselves in old Hollywood musicals. We said: "No masterpiece, but watching its star still feels like watching a master at work." Bonuses: a four-part documentary (44 minutes) and four further featurettes (27 minutes). A one night stand spirals into a deadly game of cat and mouse in **STRANGE DARLING** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), whose use of achronological ordering means it's best to go in blind. We said: "Scenes are drenched in vivid blue or red... a contender for the best-looking thriller of the year." Extras: 24 minutes of interviews. Finally, the latest TV box sets are **GENERATION Z** (Blu-ray/DVD, out now), **SEVERANCE** Season One (Blu-ray/DVD, out now), and **THE WALKING DEAD: DARYL DIXON** Season Two (Blu-ray/DVD, 16 December).



THE CITY AND ITS UNCERTAIN WALLS

The librarian and the ghost(s)

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

450 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Haruki Murakami**

Publisher **Harvill Secker**

It's an annual event, at this point. Nobel Prize season rolls round, and with it come the articles pondering whether this will finally be Haruki Murakami's year. He's been there or thereabouts on the bookies' list of favourites for well over a decade. But while 2024 has left him un-crowned yet again, it's arguably gone one better, by bringing us his fifteenth novel published in English translation.

The City And Its Uncertain Walls sees Murakami revisiting an idea from much earlier in his career. Unsatisfied with the original version – a novella published in a magazine in 1980 – he reworked it five years later as the brilliant *Hard-Boiled Wonderland And The End Of The World*, the English translation of which saw print in 1991. Divided into two parallel strands, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* is told in alternating chapters: one set in a cyberpunk future Tokyo, the other in a placeless Town whose inhabitants have no shadows.

Come 2020 and the Covid lockdown, Murakami decided that it was time for what he calls in his Afterword "a different form of response to the original story". The new novel returns to the walled, otherworldly city, and once again uses it to reflect on consciousness and selfhood, but it does so this time in a more overtly magical realist way, without the cyberpunk foil and with a much less rigid structure.

Here, the titular City remains a weirdly calm, sparsely populated place in which our protagonist works in the library as a reader of dreams; it still requires its residents to be separated from their shadows, and still has a herd of unicorns who die in droves every winter.

It's both imaginary, and a place that people from our world can visit. But in the new novel's version of the real world, our protagonist is not a futuristic human computer but a librarian in a small, quiet town, and the genre elements are woven into mundane day-to-day life – like a friendly ghost who makes *really* good tea.

This is a novel in large part about the joy of books, and the power of imagination. Both libraries are passion projects: the City's is a shrine to humanity's dreams; the other is a refuge for both art and outsiders that is kept alive only by eccentric enthusiasts. Murakami's abiding love of stories shines through, and he name-drops authors with abandon, lingering particularly over the doyen of magical realism, Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

This being Murakami, it's also a novel about melancholy men pining for vanished women. The narrator has never moved past the memory of his first girlfriend, who disappeared when he was 17. On visiting the City, he's reunited with her, but she doesn't remember him, and he feels at home in neither world.

His delightful colleague in the real-world library, Mr Koyasu, also has a tragedy in his past, but has found fulfilment in the library and happiness in defying small-town gender norms. "When I wear a skirt," he explains, "I feel like I've become a few lines from a beautiful poem."

It's a line that sums up so much of the novel's mood: this is a sideways, thoughtful and sometimes playful journey into how we understand ourselves and who we want to be. If you haven't read Murakami's work before, it may not be the place to start. But if you're looking for something to make you slow down, and reflect, and remember why libraries are great, then give it a go. **Nic Clarke**

i This 75-year-old is fitter than you: Murakami has run 40 marathons (and also one ultramarathon).

THE BOOK LOVERS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

326 pages | **Paperback/ebook**

Author **Steve Aylett**

Publisher **Snowbooks**

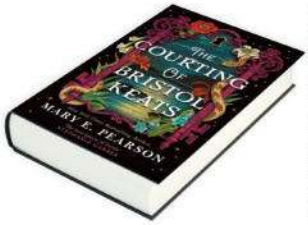
Summing up *The Book* *Lovers* is like trying to describe a spaceship to a badger via the medium of mime. You can communicate broad strokes, but key elements will inevitably be lost in translation. That's because some books are meant to be *read*.

On paper, the story seems relatively simple. A princess with a penchant for rare and strange books is kidnapped, and a policewoman strays into a steampunk underworld to save her.

But this is the work of Steve Aylett, not Neil Gaiman, and what sounds like a mythic exploration of storytelling is actually an unbroken string of one-liners so baffling that even Alan Moore (whose quote features on the front) sounds like he was slightly bewildered, calling it Aylett's "most relentless assault yet on our prissy synapses".

The novel features a recurring tome with words that change depending upon who's reading it. *The Book Lovers* feels like it's pulling the same trick, and not everyone will like what they find in front of them.

This is Aylett's most dense, challenging work. It's a stream of consciousness powerful enough to fill a water park, and you'll need razor focus in order not to drown. But the confusion is almost certainly the point; it all builds to a self-aware final line that seems to sum up the entire enterprise. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a badger to wave at. **Sam Ashurst**



THE COURTING OF BRISTOL KEATS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
541 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Mary E Pearson**
Publisher **Bramble**

This romantic fantasy is the first in a new series, and the first adult book by Mary E Pearson, who has won awards for her YA novels.

The "Courting" of the title is of course a word with several different meanings. The first, referenced early on in this book, is an attempt to win the support or help of another, as the people of Elphame try to persuade the 21-year-old Bristol to train with them and see if she's inherited a "bloodmark" that will allow her to close magical portals.

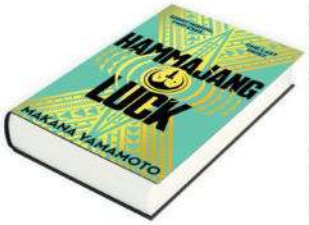
Bristol is quite sure she doesn't have any powers, but is determined to try to improve her family's fortunes and support her sisters after the deaths of their parents.

The word also implies a "court", something Bristol is quickly introduced to, with faerie dances and music and witches and princesses – and handsome young kings, too.

The third, most common meaning, is to pursue someone romantically – and yes, that comes into that too, as Bristol and fae king Tyghan work their way through a hate-to-sex-to-love plotline. It might not be original, but it's very well done.

It's a well-realised world full of lust, battles and betrayals, and a compelling read – it's just a shame there's not much in the way of plot resolution by the end of it all.

Rhian Drinkwater



HAMMAJANG LUCK

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 DECEMBER
384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Makana Yamamoto**
Publisher **Gollancz**

According to the author's acknowledgements, *Hammajang Luck*'s provisional title was *Heist Lesbians*, which, if you add in "sci-fi", pretty much tells you everything you need to know about this book. It's a tongue-in-cheek, fast-paced crime caper of the future starring an all-female team of felons from various points on the LGBTQ spectrum. It's also a whole heap of fun.

When Edie is unexpectedly given parole after eight years in prison, she returns to her home space station Keplar determined to go straight. But a former partner in crime – the same one who betrayed her and got her sent to jail – is putting together a new crew for an audacious new heist, and since Edie's skills are vital to its success, she's not taking no for an answer.

As science fiction, this is a pick 'n' mix of familiar concepts, from the settings to the hi-tech MacGuffin they plan to steal. Even the pidgin slang some characters use is straight out of *The Expanse*. The rather linear plot could also perhaps do with a couple more surprises.

But that's missing the point. It's the vibrant, blue collar characters, with their feisty interactions and droll dialogue that really make this book such a blast. By the end, you'll want to be part of their gang.

Dave Golder

THE BOOK OF GOLD

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Ruth Frances Long**
Publisher **Hodderscape**

Political and religious power struggles provide the backdrop to the first volume in Ruth Frances Long's Feral Gods trilogy. The setting, a city called Amberes, is modelled on sixteenth century Antwerp.

When Lyta's brother, a printer called Kit, is charged with sedition, she offers to earn his pardon by stealing a rare tome for King Francisco. Unfortunately, the desired book is in the possession of the powerful Duchess Of Montalbeau, whose castle is rife with deadly enchanted traps, even as Lyta's quest forces her to confront her old lover, now royal bodyguard, Sylvian.

Long builds her world with care and detail while celebrating the power of the printed word through the idea of a book that contains the might of gods themselves.

However, the busy plotting threatens to crowd out the characters, denying them the time to develop beyond broad strokes. Several key supporting players function just to facilitate sticky narrative moments, and Lyta's missing husband Ranulf is a MacGuffin in all but name.

Similarly, Long relies too much on divine intervention and magic to solve problems. The most egregious instance is Lyta's miraculous, unexplained escape from another dimension in a bad case of deus ex machina. A lively but uneven read, then.

David West

SLEEPING WORLDS HAVE NO MEMORY

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
382 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Yaroslav Barsukov**
Publisher **Caezik SF & Fantasy**

There's no lack of ambition in Yaroslav Barsukov's debut novel, which explores ideas about perception and the nature of reality.

After refusing to order his troops to gas protestors during a riot, Lord Shea Ashcroft is dispatched to a remote border town to oversee the construction of a colossal defensive tower, designed to shoot down aircraft from the neighbouring nation of Dumia.

But Ashcroft discovers that the technology behind the project is dangerously unstable, and that the refugees known as the Drakiri believe the tower's completion will precipitate the apocalypse.

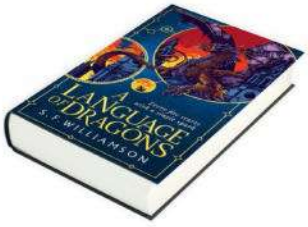
There's a great deal to digest in *Sleeping Worlds Have No Memory*. At the outset, the story deals with espionage and political intrigue, then takes a turn towards fantasy as Ashcroft crosses a boundary between worlds, before the finale adds an existential, philosophical angle. There are coded journals to decipher, an old vendetta to settle, and much more besides.

Barsukov works hard to weave all the threads into a cohesive whole, but the story raises profound questions that the Russian author struggles to fully resolve.

He's clearly a writer grappling with big, bold conceits, yet the overall effect is slightly dry and detached.

David West

Reviews



A LANGUAGE OF DRAGONS

★★★½☆

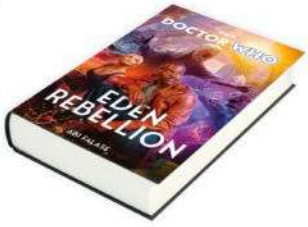
RELEASED 2 JANUARY
480 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **SF Williamson**
Publisher **Harper Fire**

One can't help but wonder what master codebreaker Alan Turing would make of this book's tagline: "Welcome to Bletchley Park... with dragons." While he saved wartime Britain by helping to crack the Enigma code, this team are trying to decipher the echolocation calls used by dragons.

It's 1923 and we're in Britannia, a country straining under an unfair class system and a shaky peace agreement between humans and dragons. After her parents are arrested, Vivien Featherswallow is blackmailed into working for the Prime Minister to crack dragons' calls – this will, apparently, help to quash an uprising, but the truth is rather more sinister.

It's a cracking idea (pardon the pun) and SF Williamson creates a fascinating world filled with arsey dragons and backstabbing teenagers. The academic elements intrigue without slowing the pace, while Vivien's wavering loyalties are convincing.

The final act's a bit of a fumble, however; there's too much talking, with characters repeating plot points over and over. Sometimes it's best to trust that readers have figured it out. Correspondingly, action scenes don't have enough detail to provide their intended shock and awe. Yet these issues don't prevent this being an enjoyably nerdy dark fantasy. **Jayne Nelson**



DOCTOR WHO: EDEN REBELLION

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
188 pages | Hardback/ebook/
Author **Abi Falase**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Forgive the spoiler, but the latest Fifteenth Doctor novel involves a malignant force which feeds off negativity, while causing some people to bury the pain of past events, and others to simply not care about them. Its name? *Empire*. Talk about on the nose...

Don't worry, we're not about to launch into a Laurence Fox-style rant. Colonialism has been an appropriate subject for *Doctor Who* for decades – as Jon Pertwee adventure "The Mutants" proved. The real problem with *Eden Rebellion* is not its theme, but that reading it is such a tiresome trudge.

It's set on the planet Yewa, where the Gardens of Kubuntu are home to a luxury resort. Abi Falase's descriptions of polished marble, glistening jewels and flowers with prismatic petals (plus "decadent desserts" and "intoxicating aromas") conjure a world that, frankly, sounds revoltingly gaudy.

A group of rebels are determined to expel outsiders (mostly from sister planet Bia) from the Gardens, which we're told are the planet's only source of oxygen. This doesn't seem like a plausible basis for an ecosystem. The mysteries (or at least unanswered questions) soon stack up – so high that when he's not gabbling technobabble, the Doctor has to rattle off a helpful list. Twice. Problem is, you'll find it hard to care about any of them. **Calvin Baxter**

TROLL: A LOVE STORY

★★★★☆

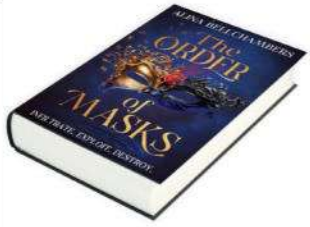
RELEASED OUT NOW!
288 pages | Paperback
Author **Johanna Sinisalo**
Publisher **Pushkin Press**

We're not talking internet trolls here. Nope, they're very much the trolls of legend: lurking in the dark forests of Finland, living alongside but out of the reach of humans, and only rarely caught on camera.

Rarely, that is, until graphic designer Mikael comes along. Returning home to his apartment after a disastrous date, he disturbs a group of teenagers abusing a strange-looking animal. Taking pity on the cub, he brings it inside and nurses him back to health.

The more time he spends with "Pessi", the more attached he becomes, even photographing him for a new ad campaign he's working on – though he has to lie to hot ad director Martes about how much Photoshop was involved. But as tame as Mikael's troll baby seems to be, he's still a wild animal, and wild animals can be unpredictable...

Told through short, snappy chapters from an array of different perspectives (Mikael, Martes, Mikael's ex, a cute nerd from the gay bar, and Mikael's neighbour) interspersed with snippets from Finnish literature, this is a quick, easy read that nonetheless casts a bewitching spell. We're being led astray along with Mikael, drawn down troll roads where nothing is quite what it seems. Shocking in parts and heartbreaking in others, this is a stunning bit of modern-day mythmaking. **Sarah Dobbs**



THE ORDER OF MASKS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 12 DECEMBER
416 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **Alina Bellchambers**
Publisher **Hodderscape**

It's never a good sign when you're halfway through a novel and realise that you've forgotten which character POV you're reading. It's *definitely* not a good sign when it's the hundredth time it's happened...

The Order Of Masks centres on two women who really shouldn't be interchangeable. Mira is a circus performer so determined to make something of herself that she volunteers for a series of athletic and magical trials. Then there's Scarlett, a princess trying to survive amid a deadly, scheming court.

While each chapter begins with their names, their voices sound so similar that sometimes you need to check who the character is talking to, in order to figure out who they are. And this is a problem, because as the book progresses they start to mix with each other's acquaintances!

At least both women are given interesting plot arcs; Scarlett in particular is pleasingly hard to pigeonhole (bitch, or confused princess with a squishy heart?). Debut author Alina Bellchambers is adept at crafting a rich world, and her plot machinations (and saucy romps!) are fun.

But the sameyness of her narrators is an issue, as is the repetition of certain clichés or phrases. Not quite the pulsing, polished thriller it could have been. **Meg Wilde**

THE ART OF FUTURAMA

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
176 pages | Hardback
Author **Matt Groening**
Publisher **Abrams ComicArts**

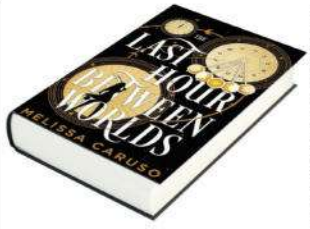
Matt Groening clearly learnt his lesson from *The Simpsons*. Whereas his rough, last-minute sketches of the Springfield family were directly translated to the screen by animators for their debut on *The Tracey Ullman Show*, his next series *Futurama* benefited from years of preparation.

Coinciding with the show's 25th anniversary, *The Art Of Futurama* draws on the vast archive of sketches, concept art and developmental work that defined the look of the year 3000. With the help of showrunner David X Cohen and producer Claudia Katz, Groening reveals how they brought to life everything from New New York to gadgets, vehicles and, of course, gyrating robot strippers.

There are dozens of drafts of the Planet Express crew to pore over, and even guides explaining how to draw Leela, Fry and Bender, which provide a fascinating insight into Rough Draft Studios' animation process. The first seven seasons are the main focus, with the Hulu revival absent due to publishing schedules.

While it would have been interesting to learn more about how production of the show has evolved – or see more of the visual gags, which are confined to an abrupt closing chapter – it's still a visual treat worthy of a Bender eye zoom. Good news, everyone!

Dom Carter



THE LAST HOUR BETWEEN WORLDS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Melissa Caruso**
Publisher **Orbit**

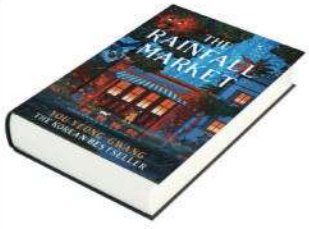
Have you ever felt like a party was just going on *forever*? That's a real issue for "Hound" Kembral Thorne in this fantasy novel set over a single evening – but one that keeps resetting, again and again.

Kembral is still on leave with her two-month-old baby when she accepts a single night out at a party filled with the great and the good of Acantis. Suddenly there is chaos and death all around her, but then the clock chimes, the room *changes* and everyone is alive again. Kembral is the only one who seems to remember what happened.

As the evening goes on, resetting again and again, she realises they're descending through layers of "Echos" – twisted reflections of her world that get ever more surreal and dangerous – and the partygoers are trapped in a game between powerful creatures determined to win at all costs.

It's a clever conceit, as the tale ticks through the hours and the layers, each new Echo providing a new chance for Kembral to investigate. It's also great to see a fantasy novel filled with magical illusions and god-like beings also wrestle with issues of maternity leave and breastfeeding. The tale could be a little tighter, with fewer layers to tick through, but Kembral's fierce combination of fear, determination and love shines throughout.

Rhian Drinkwater



THE RAINFALL MARKET

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
224 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **You Yeong-Gwang**
Publisher **Penguin**

The spirit of Studio Ghibli is strong with this one. On every page is a moment that could have leapt from a Hayao Miyazaki movie – from its heroine's determination (think Chihiro and her furrowed brow from *Spirited Away*) to the cat who accompanies her, a feline who's half Jiji from *Kiki's Delivery Service* and half *Totoro* Catbus.

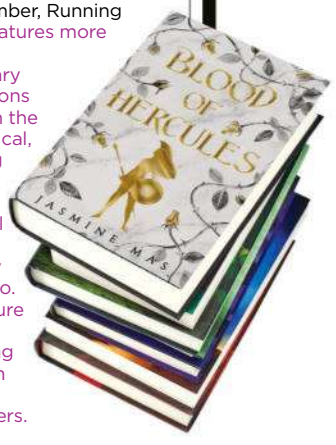
Translated from Korean, the book tells the story of Serin: a schoolgirl navigating a tough, poverty-stricken life (yes, there are shades of *Parasite*, although younger readers will miss that reference). But then Serin is given a golden ticket to visit the elusive Rainfall Market, inhabited by magical creatures who steal human emotions.

In return, selected visitors get to check out special orbs which give them the life they've always wanted. As Serin searches for her perfect orb, it gradually becomes clear that someone at the market is up to no good.

The prose is pleasant and easy to read, although occasionally a sentence feels a little clunky; perhaps as a result of translation, or perhaps it needed another proof-read. And Serin, while sweet, does feel too innocent and gullible to be *entirely* sympathetic. Yet Miyazaki would probably love her, and it's easy to imagine watching this instead of reading it. **Jayne Nelson**

ALSO OUT

There's plenty more books we couldn't squeeze in. Found family and fantastic creatures feature in Rose Black's piratical fantasy **FATED WINDS AND PROMISING SEAS** (out now, Hodder & Stoughton). When a Leviathan attacks a prison, a traumatised inmate accused of murdering his mother is released, then taken in by the crew of The Dreamer – some of whom have the ability to manipulate water. The story of Hercules is the latest Greek myth to get the reimagining treatment in Jasmine Mas's romantasy **BLOOD OF HERCULES** (out now, Harper Voyager). Set in a world where immortals with god-like powers rule, it sees its female protagonist forced to attend the Spartan War Academy to see if she has what it takes to be an immortal. Turning to continuing series: Tasha Suri's Burning Kingdoms trilogy (set in a fantasy version of medieval India) wraps up with **THE LOTUS EMPIRE** (out now, Orbit). And Jeff Noon and Steve Beard complete their Chronicles Of Ludwich duology with **LUDLUDA** (3 December, Angry Robot), which continues the journey of a riverboat captain, a young girl and her android guardian down the Nysis, an alternative Thames imbued with supernatural qualities. Finally, **THE ROCKY HORROR COOKBOOK** (5 December, Running Press) features more than 50 culinary concoctions based on the cult musical, including Riff Raff Ramen and Thrill Me Chill Me Spicy Gazpacho. Don't injure yourself by getting hot oil on your suspenders.



First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

Days Of Shattered Faith

by Adrian Tchaikovsky

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY RETURNS TO THE DARKLY EXUBERANT WORLD OF THE TYRANT PHILOSOPHERS

Welcome to Alkhalend, Jewel of the Waters, capital of Usmai and tomorrow's frontline in the Palleseen's relentless march to bring Perfection and Correctness to an imperfect world.

On the ship, as it tacked in past the sea wall, she was in her coffin of a cabin trying, by stub of candle and sequin of mirror, to make herself presentable. Clean shirt, clean face, uniform darned and done up. What does the mirror show her? By the time she's done, and the drum of feet overhead has the character of unloading and disembarking, not just seamanship, all that's visible is a bobbing phantom, a paleness like the face of a drowned woman sinking into dark water. When she makes the deck, evening is shading into night. Of the wonders of Alkhalend – "Oh you must view it from the sea, the waters, the palaces!" – there is nothing. Even the moon has taken the night off. She steps off the gangplank into darkness. And now this.

Loret had spent the voyage braced for pirates. The war with the Loruthi was done but all the boats and fleets and whole pillage-happy coastal fiefdoms were still out there, and hungry as ever. She'd thought she'd be past the threat of them when she stepped onto shore, except what she stepped onto wasn't even the shore. Someone had put a shifting maze of jetties and rafts and boats between her ship and dry land, and then hung it with an inadequate quantity of lanterns that made every step a flirtation with drowning. And she could swim, as even the meanest child of the Archipelago could, but not in a space where great floating weights of wood clashed together like nautical teeth.

The city was only in evidence from its own lamps, and these were strung upwards as though the whole of Alkhalend had been arrested in the midst of being lifted into the heavens by divine fiat. Not an image that should come readily to a good, god-denying Palleseen girl, but desperation was the prybar that opened foolish minds to divinity, as they'd said back in the phalanstery. They'd said a lot of things in the phalanstery, in the classes she'd sat through with her mind on her belly, or anything else. Now she wished she'd listened rather better because this place wasn't anywhere she'd wanted to end up.

Alkhalend, the Jewel of the Waters, capital of Usmai, greatest of the Successor States that had once been part of the... she couldn't even remember the name of whatever dead empire had once claimed this part of the world, and then petrified into a little kernel of tombs centuries ago, a receding tide that had left places like Usmai to grapple with their neighbours over who got to wield the big stick. Usmai, Alkhalend; yes, such beauty, yes, so exotic. She'd never wanted to be here. If she'd been curious she could have read a book or something.

And dark, so the beauty and exoticism just became a lot of unfamiliar and unpleasant noises that sounded terrifying.

Then the man, appearing at her elbow. The enormous, tattooed, scarred, terrifying man. Was this what an Usmiat looked like? She rather thought it wasn't. He was seven feet tall and bare chested except for a leather harness. He addressed her in a language she didn't know – one she didn't even know anything like – and then in Usmiri, bringing his face down close to hers and making the words slowly. Not like a man who wasn't happy with the language but like a man who thought she was very stupid. And she did speak Usmiri. Or she spoke some Usmiri. And had not been practising from her primer on the voyage because someone had assured her that Pel and Usmiri shared a lot of vocabulary and so "you'll pick it up really quickly". The man spoke to her now, and she caught only a word that sounded a lot like "lost".

She had nodded before realising that, as a lone foreign woman in a shifting maze of docks, admitting to being lost wasn't the

> **"The man grinned at her. He had a terrifying grin. Three of his teeth were made of greenstone"**

The Author

Adrian Tchaikovsky is a British science fiction and fantasy writer known for a wide variety of work including the Children Of Time, Final Architecture, Dogs Of War, Tyrant Philosophers and Shadows Of The Apt series, as well as standalone books such as *Elder Race*, *Doors Of Eden*, *Spiderlight* and many others. His Children Of Time series has won the Arthur C Clarke, Hugo, and BSFA awards, and his other works have won the British Fantasy, British Science Fiction and Sidewise Awards.

PORTRAIT BY TOM PEPPERDINE, STOCK ART BY ISTOCK.COM/GETTY

wisest thing in the world.

In about nine heartbeats she was on his ship. Or on a ship that he felt comfortable just strolling onto. In a room with about a dozen men and women who all looked similarly terrifying. They wore too few clothes and were all of them leanly muscled as though they spent each spare moment cracking nuts with every part of their anatomy. The man who'd found her told everyone who she was in that first language, that seemed gesture as much as word; the language that wasn't even the language she had failed at honing over the voyage. They all laughed, probably at her. One woman had teeth that were filed sharp. Some of them were wearing even sharper teeth around their necks. They had great wild mops of hair, unlike the man who'd found her whose head was shaved bald and intricately inked. Then a woman with a dense interweaving of abstract piscine forms tattooed all over her cleavage came in, and she had a tatty Palleseen uniform coat over her shoulders. Which did not, Loret understood, suggest any kind of national sympathy, but instead meant they certainly killed and probably even ate Palleseen nationals. And then wore their clothing and possibly their skins.

The pirates were very real, she understood. These were just very lazy pirates who didn't even go to sea to do their raiding. They waited for stupid foreigners to get off the boat, and grabbed them.

"I have," she said – in Pel because every word of Usmiri had gone from her head, "diplomatic credentials. I am the new aide. For the Palleseen Resident. It is very – very important I reach the Residence." The Residence had a name and she couldn't remember it. "There will be a reward." Making large with money she didn't have.

The man who had found her leaned forwards over the little round table, that was scattered with wooden cups. The woman with the jacket poured something nasty into most of them, and put one in Loret's hands.

The man who had found her leaned forwards over the little round table, that was scattered with wooden cups. The woman with the jacket poured something nasty into most of them, and put one in Loret's hands.

"Drink," she said. Usmiri, but Loret knew that word.

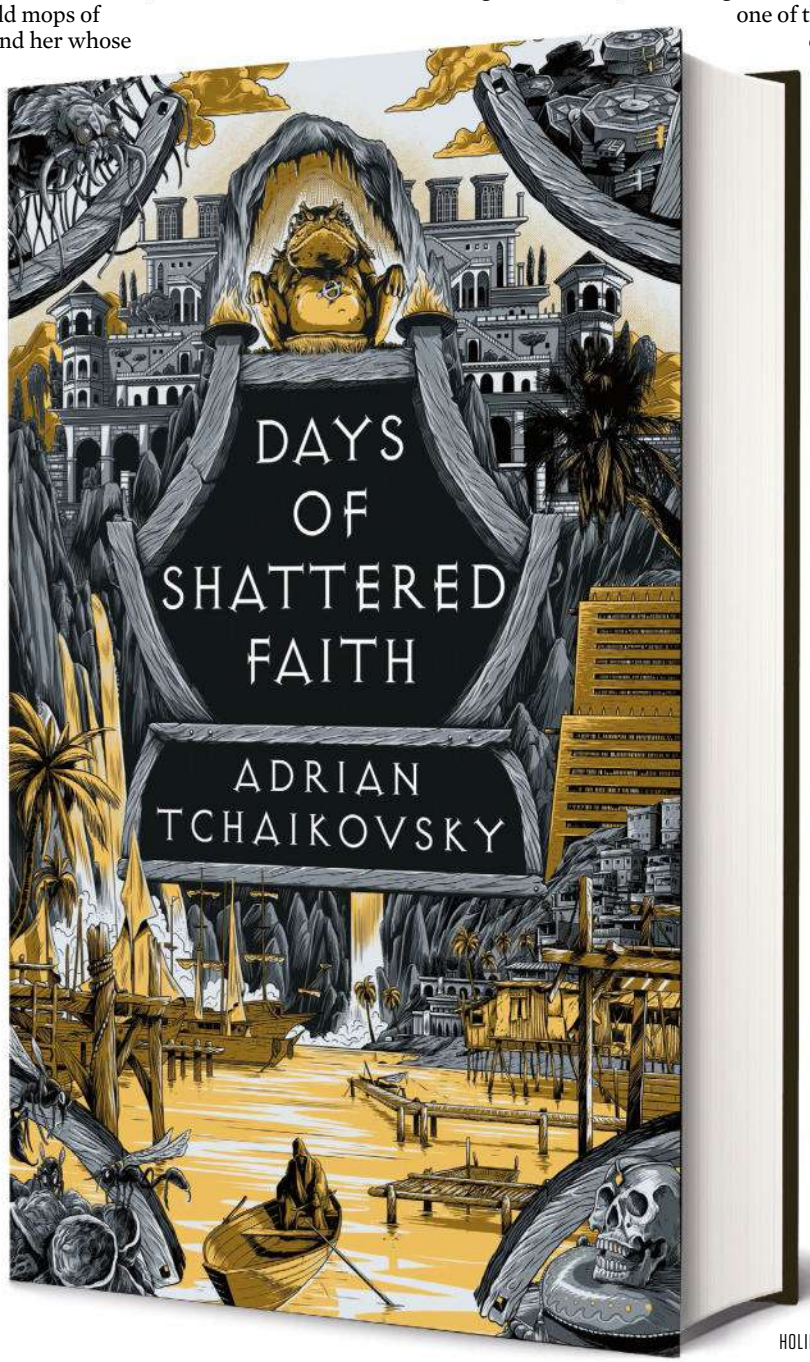
She hadn't enjoyed being on the ship, on the ocean. She got sick, and everything smelled, and she'd been terrified that someone on board would know too much or get too curious. But she understood now that being on that ship was the zenith of her later life. Because it had been better than being on the Archipelago and waiting for the jaws to close on her, better than the camps. And it had been better than being in a cabin crowded with ferocious pirates about to kill, strip and devour her.

She knocked back the cup, all of it in one go. It was... on one level it was horrible. Unlike anything she'd ever drunk and simultaneously horrible in a way she'd never even imagined. Not taste-horrible but actually existential. On the other hand it set her brain on fire in a way that burned away all the fear and uncertainty and apparently even uncovered the rough foundations of her Usmiri because suddenly she remembered how to say, "Show me the way to the embassy if you please," and said it quite loud and without much gap in between any of the words. For a second and a half, something was lit in her, as though she was one of those fish from the deep depths, that set itself on cold fire to stave off the dark.

The pirates found this hilarious. And, she realised, quite impressive. Whatever she'd just drunk didn't normally get knocked back in such a cavalier way by visiting foreigners straight off the boat. The man grinned at her. He had a terrifying grin. Three of his teeth were made of greenstone, intricately carved and then varnished over with some kind of clear lacquer, presumably so they didn't just start to fester with ingrained bits of all the people he ate. She realised she was staring.

He put a hand on her shoulder, and all the way around her shoulder because her shoulders were slender and his hands were enormous.

"Islerwoman," he said, like it was a title of honour, "I shall take you to Slate House. If that is where you need to be."



Read more in Days Of Shattered Faith, the third interconnected standalone fantasy in Adrian Tchaikovsky's The Tyrant Philosophers series, out on 5 December.

THE POWER FANTASY

All In The (Nuclear) Family

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer **Kieron Gillen**
Artist **Caspar Wijngaard**

ISSUES 1-3 **As fun as superhero** comics are, there's always been a fundamental uneasiness to the concept. As we've seen many times in real life, granting individuals too much power and the unchecked ability to make life or death decisions that affect the rest of the planet rarely turns out well.

Writer Kieron Gillen (hot off a run on *Immortal X-Men* with his first creator-owned comic for several years) and artist Caspar Wijngaard's new ongoing series explores this tension in the form of a twisty thriller that lands somewhere between *Succession* and *Watchmen*.

There are six Superpowers in the world. We're not talking nations here: no, these are six individuals, each of whom wields enough power to destroy *everything*. If they were to ever come into meaningful conflict it would mean nothing less than the end of humanity. Luckily, they are a family and – on the surface at least – benevolent, acting with everyone's best interests at heart. But families sometimes fight...

We're introduced to this world through the eyes of Tonya, a journalist and low-powered Atomic: people with some degree of superpower, relatively common in this world, though it seems that most only have very limited abilities. She is interviewing Etienne Lux, elder statesman of the so-called Nuclear Family. Unfortunately, it's about now that his tempestuous brother "Heavy" chooses to flex his muscles, causing the US President to retaliate. That does not go well for the States. What follows is a desperate scramble to deescalate the tensions.

Despite the presence of six feuding characters, each of whom wields the strength of a Superman or a Doctor Manhattan, Gillen and Wijngaard's series isn't at all interested in the staples of typical cape comics: fights, monsters and soap opera character dynamics. Instead, this is more akin to a Cold War story set in a well-realised (and beautifully-drawn by Wijngaard) alternative timeline.

> **"Gillen and Wijngaard conjure a sense of dreadful inevitability"**

There have been comics exploring the "superheroes are nukes" idea before, but *The Power Fantasy* really commits to the bit, drilling into what that would actually mean.

Etienne talks a lot about ethics throughout but, much like various world leaders, the members of the Family are arrogant, haughty, and volatile – more concerned with their own egos than human lives. Gillen and Wijngaard conjure a sense of dreadful inevitability throughout, with the fear that the worst is yet to come hanging over every page. **Will Salmon**

I came down from perfection...
...to protect those within time.
This is how *SFX*'s editor makes his entrance.
Thank you for concealing us.
No one needs to see this.

i The original title for *The Power Fantasy* was *The Superpowers*, but that was vetoed as the word is a trademark owned by DC.

PHOO ACTION: SILVER JUBILEE

★★★★½

RELEASED **3 DECEMBER**
Publisher **Titan Comics**
Writers **Jamie Hewlett, Mat Wakeham**
Artist **Jamie Hewlett**

COLLECTION **This is a strange** book, and one that perhaps requires a bit of a history lesson.

Jamie Hewlett is best known as the artist behind anarchic '90s hero Tank Girl and cartoon pop band Gorillaz. In between those two projects he co-created (with Mat Wakeham) *Get The Freebies* – a peculiar, hilarious comic that ran for 12 episodes in style magazine *The Face*.

The strip, about the adventures of acerbic Whitey Action and kung-fu hero Terry Phoo, was a deranged mix of superspy antics and of-the-time pop culture references (one notable story arc is titled "Fantastic Voyage To The Centre Of Steve Lamacq"). Afterwards, Hewlett and Wakeham started work on a sequel, *Phoo Action*. Alas, only one chapter was completed.

This lavish 460-page volume presents all of *Get The Freebies*, the sole chapter of *Phoo Action*, plus a new prose serial by Wakeham that fleshes out the duo's plans for the series into a full story. Also included is a wealth of background material, and an exhaustive look into the making of the *Phoo Action* TV pilot for BBC Three.

It's a definitive collection, one that really makes the case for *Freebies/Phoo* being as significant as Hewlett's other work. It's also a time capsule of a very specific moment in British pop culture. **Will Salmon**

NYX

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writers **Collin Kelly, Jackson Lanzing**
Artist **Francesco Mortarino**

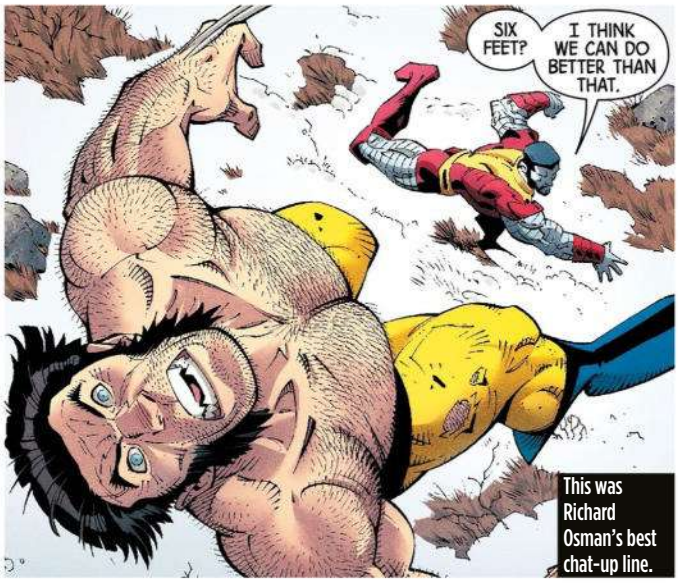
ISSUES 1-4 **The *From The*** *Ashes* era of the X-Men is in full swing, with Marvel's mutant comics exploring the aftermath of the fall of island nation Krakoa. *NYX* (think "New York X") isn't a traditional *X-Men* book as such, but it does centre on a group of mutants as they struggle with rebuilding their lives in a world that has proved even more hostile to their existence than they could have previously suspected.

The big name here is Ms Marvel, now officially a mutant following her resurrection, and studying at Empire State University. The Laura Kinney Wolverine is lurking in the shadows, while also along for the ride are mutant Prodigy (now a teacher), Kamala Khan's complicated "new best friend" Sophie Cuckoo, and green-skinned bartender Anole.

It's a cool cast of characters, and *NYX* is at its best when simply hanging out with them in a well-evoked, believably grotty New York (artist Francesco Mortarino and colourist Raúl Angulo offer up some fine location work). The threat posed by the anti-mutant Truthsayers is the latest riff on the X-Men's traditional "feared and hated" metaphor, but its simplicity works.

NYX doesn't exactly reinvent the superhero wheel, then, but it's an enjoyable comic about flawed heroes trying to make the best of a world that has let them down.

Will Salmon



This was Richard Osman's best chat-up line.

WOLVERINE: REVENGE

Bad blood

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer **Jonathan Hickman**
Artist **Greg Capullo**

ISSUES 1-3 **It sometimes feels like** superhero comics just can't stop celebrating anniversaries. The latest example marks the fact that it's five decades since everyone's favourite grumpy Canadian killing machine arrived.

This five-issue miniseries brings a heavyweight creative team together for a tale of adamantium-enhanced vengeance, but with Jonathan Hickman on script duties the set-up inevitably isn't as simplistic as the no-nonsense title would suggest.

Revenge is an out-of-continuity story, in which Magneto's death unleashes an electromagnetic pulse that brings the world's technology to a standstill. Wolverine joins a mission to solve this problem, but a group of enemy mutants turn it into a massacre, and he's the only survivor. The rest of the plot in these first three issues follows his murderous quest for payback, and veteran artist Greg Capullo clearly enjoys the chance to cut loose with lurid violence (especially in the gorier "Red Band Edition" versions of each issue.)

> **"Delivers energetic and sturdy visuals"**

Throughout, he delivers energetic and sturdy visuals, while also being just as effective in the story's quieter moments. It's these that make the series feel genuinely distinctive, as Hickman gives the story an admirably downbeat tone that bounces between predictable revenge thriller tropes and some unexpected surprises.

Most notable of these is the fact that Logan completes his vengeance at the end of issue three, with the story far from over. True, *Revenge* hasn't yet gone far enough beyond "Wolverine kills the bad guys" to feel really remarkable, but it's still a satisfying superhero comic that's darker and more daring than it looks.

Saxon Bullock

i This is the first time Greg Capullo has worked on a Marvel comic in 31 years, since joining Image Comics in 1993.

THE JOSÉ MUÑOZ COLLECTION

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Rebellion**
Writers **Chris Lowder, Frank S Pepper**
Artists **José Muñoz, Eric Bradbury**

COLLECTION **Another delve** into the backpages of British boys' comic *Lion*, this latest volume collects three obscure '70s strips by Argentine artist José Muñoz. "I threw everything but the kitchen sink at him," says writer Chris Lowder in his introduction; judging by the wildly inventive work on display, Muñoz – an inspiration to Frank Miller, no less – could have caught that sink and juggled it.

Opener "Stitch In Time" finds local yob Stitch Cotton – "the toughest kid in Highhill New Town" – stealing the time machine of an interplanetary despot. With junior Spock-a-like Varl at his side, Stitch takes on robots, dinosaurs and space pirates, even using his footie skills to save the day. Muñoz's art has a frantic energy that matches the madcap pace.

"Lost In Limbo Land" proves an equally breakneck peril-fest as young Barry Smith is zapped by lightning and flung into the realm of Norse mythology, just in time for Ragnarok. Barry's a bookworm but relax, chums: he's not "a swotty little creep – he just liked reading!"

Final strip "Sark The Sleeper" once again breathlessly piles on the danger but it's underpinned by a SF conceit: a generational starship, carrying the last humans, along with enough marauding beasties to keep those pages turning. **Nick Setchfield**

DRAGON AGE: THE VEILGUARD

Old dragon, new tricks

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PS5**
Also on **PC, Xbox Series X|S**
Publisher **Electronic Arts**

VIDEOGAME **The ancient elven god** Solas is once again up to no good in BioWare's latest RPG, and it's up to you and a ragtag group of like-minded individuals (that you first need to recruit) to stop him. Cue roughly 80 hours of trudging through swamps, crypts and other dim alcoves in order to get the job done. Thankfully, all of those hours are more fun than that perhaps sounds.

If the idea of fantasy *Mass Effect* appeals to you, *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* will scratch that itch. The core combat design strays far from *Dragon Age: Origins*, instead favouring a strong action bent. Each fight is a mechanical juggling match to see whether you can dodge, dip, duck, dive and dodge your way through masses of enemies while firing off your own abilities and generally managing several meters, timers and positioning.

Each class – Rogue, Warrior and Mage – has three specialisations, each with a significant tree of skills, both active and passive, to support any way you want to play. Want to get up close and smash mercenaries with your shield? Or electrify enemies at range with spells? You can do that! The possibilities aren't endless, with only so many combinations, but even maxing out your level won't net you every single ability for a class. This, alongside the added ability to simply refund and respend your skill points whenever you like outside of combat, makes for a lot of flexibility to find what works for you.

> **"A meaningful final chapter of what Dragon Age was"**

The other half of the equation for any *Dragon Age* game (or BioWare game, for that matter) is a satisfying narrative, and *The Veilguard* absolutely has that. Without spoiling anything, exploring the very nature of magic and history of the world includes a whole mess of catnip for lore nerds. And that's without even getting into the gentleman necromancer, coffee-loving assassin, and magical detective that round out your party.

All told, *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* is a meaningful final chapter of what *Dragon Age* was, as well as a solid foundation for what it could be going forward.

Rollin Bishop

i Eight-episode tie-in podcast *Dragon Age: Vows & Vengeance* provides backstories for the companions in *The Veilguard*.

SLITTERHEAD

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **Xbox Series X**
Also on **PS5, PS4, PC**
Publisher **Bokeh Game Studio**

VIDEOGAME **Set in an** overcrowded city besieged by brain-sucking monstrosities, *Slitterhead* is a grisly body horror romp with lashings of '90s noir kitsch, dynamic third-person action and thoughtful philosophical musings – all topped with a sprinkle of old-school jank.

Bokeh Game Studio's debut introduces us to a wandering spirit known as a Hyoki. Piecing together fragments of its broken memory amid the neon-lit bustle of Kowlong, a singular purpose guides it to destroy all Slitterheads: monsters hiding in plain sight, capable of shedding their human bodies to reveal a grotesque insectoid form.

However, the Hyoki soon learns that its greatest weapon – the people of Kowlong – comes at a price. Quickly jumping between hosts through spiritual possession is not only effortless but crucial for monster slaying, providing a tactical edge in combat that quickly gains momentum. But with so many humans killed in the process, the Hyoki's emerging sense of empathy complicates this all-out war.

So begins a time-bending, blood-spattered sci-fi journey with more soapy twists than a *Coronation Street* omnibus. Sure, story progression can feel disjointed at times, as can the repetition of replaying missions in search of missed opportunities, but these never detract from *Slitterhead*'s bold ambition and keen originality.

Jasmine Gould-Wilson

THE WORLD OF TIM BURTON

Face to face

★★★☆☆

RUNNING UNTIL 21 APRIL

Venue **Design Museum, London**

ROB HARRIS FOR THE DESIGN MUSEUM

EXHIBITION **You'd be forgiven for** thinking *The World Of Tim Burton* was a new exhibition; in fact, it's been touring the world for the last decade. Burton himself said it didn't feel real until it landed on his doorstep.

Presumably that doorstep is painted black and white while sitting at a jaunty angle, as many of the rooms at the Design Museum will be until April.

Beautifully presented and suitably kooky, one thing it's not is a deep archival dive into his finished films – there are only two small sections for gothic masterpieces *Sweeney Todd* and *Sleepy Hollow*, while *Dumbo* is (mercifully) all but overlooked. Still, you'll find much to please you if you're a fan of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* or *Corpse Bride*, and even get to gasp at Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman suit.

However, these films have nearly all been the subject of extensive making-of books, so it's no wonder that his other work is given preference here. You'll see more of the abstract inspiration for the art of *Beetlejuice*'s Delia Deetz, alongside a huge collection of early work, Burton's pop culture inspirations from film to comics and magazines, and non-film-related creations across books, photography and music videos.

Burton's an artist, and that side of him shines here. The Blue Girl series (also given form as *Nightmare*'s Sally) has extensive representation. What's most fascinating is his work on projects that are rarely seen or were never realised, such as his 1983 Disney Channel short *Hansel And Gretel*, and his contributions to *The Black Cauldron* and *Superman Lives*.

> **"Beautifully presented and suitably kooky"**

Even though the exhibition is extensive, it still leaves you wanting more – as though the entire Design Museum could, and should, have been turned into a Burton shrine. **Darren Scott**

i Can't make it to London? Fret not: you can buy an official exhibition catalogue from the Design Museum's online shop.

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO EARTH'S INVASIONS
BBC DOCTOR WHO
THE GOLD ARCHIVE
INVASIONS OF EARTH: A SECRET HISTORY
BY MIKE TUCKER AND STEVE COLE
WARNING: PAGES 260–267
RECURRING THREATS: WEEPING ANGELS
By Morris Gibbons, UNIT scientific adviser (deputising)
BBC logo™ and © BBC 1996. DOCTOR WHO logo™ and © BBC 1973. Licensed by BBC Studios.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

SOAP OPERA

From Southfork to Albert Square, our latest quiz tests your knowledge of soaps in sci-fi and fantasy – and the connections between the genres

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
In which TV series do we see various characters watching a soap opera called *Invitation To Love*?

QUESTION 2
Ben Wheatley's horror series *Generation Z* features two leads famous for appearing in soaps in the '80s. Name them.

QUESTION 3
Name the *Neighbours*-esque mechanoid soap which was a favourite of *Red Dwarf*'s Kryten.

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Name the soap star and the *Doctor Who* story they appeared in.

QUESTION 5
In *Futurama*, who was the "leading man" of all-robot soap opera *All My Circuits*?

QUESTION 6
Name the *Doctor Who/EastEnders* crossover which aired as part of *Children In Need* in 1993.

QUESTION 7
In *Star Trek: Voyager* two-parter "Future's End", which two crew members discover the joys of soap opera while monitoring transmissions from Earth?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Name the soap star and their *Doctor Who* character.

QUESTION 9
Name the vampire character played by Jonathan Frid in gothic soap *Dark Shadows*.

QUESTION 10
And which actor starred as the character in the 2012 movie version of *Dark Shadows*?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
How did Fallon Colby make a surprising exit in the final episode of *Dynasty* spin-off *The Colbys*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Name the soap star and the *Doctor Who* episode they appeared in.

QUESTION 13
Name the 1972 sci-fi sequel movie directed by future *Dallas* star Larry Hagman.

QUESTION 14
Which *EastEnders* actor co-created and starred in the 1997 alien invasion miniseries *The Uninvited*?

QUESTION 15
Which *Neighbours* actor starred in the '90s remake of '70s show *The Tomorrow People*?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Name the soap star and the *Doctor Who* episode they appeared in.

QUESTION 17
Name the sci-fi soap from the '90s which was centred on a university in orbit around Callisto.

QUESTION 18
Lucy Benjamin (Lisa Fowler in *EastEnders*) was briefly a *Doctor Who* companion. Explain how.

QUESTION 19
Which *Emmerdale* star's directing credits include *Wolf Manor* and *Attack Of The Adult Babies*?

QUESTION 20
The *Doctor Who* episode "Army Of Ghosts" features a cameo by an actor playing her famous soap character. Which character?

Answers
1 *Twin Peaks* 2 Anita Dobson, Sue Johnston 3 *Androids* 4 June Brown, "The Time Warrior" 5 Calculon 6 "Dimensions In Time" 7 Neelix and Kes 8 Kate O'Mara, The Rani 9 Barnabas Collins 10 Johnny Depp 11 She boarded a UFO 12 Kylie Minogue, "Voyage Of The Damned" 13 *Beware! The Blob* 14 Leslie Grantham 15 Kristian Schmid 16 Michelle Collins, "42" 17 *Jupiter Moon* 18 Aged 12, she played a young Nyssa 19 Dominic Brunt 20 Peggy Mitchell

How did you do?

We couldn't think of a witty system...

0-5 Terrible
6-10 Disappointing
11-15 Acceptable
16-19 Good
20 Perfection

PICTURES © BBC

SFX

HOLIDAY SPECIAL 2024 | Issue 386

Future PLC, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editor
Darren Scott
darren.scott@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor
Ian Berriman
ian.berriman@futurenet.com

Art Editor
Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@futurenet.com

Production Editor
Ed Ricketts
ed.ricketts@futurenet.com

Editor At Large
Nick Setchfield

US Editor
Tara Bennett

Contributors
Sam Ashurst, Calvin Baxter, Rollin Bishop, Simon Bland, Saxon Bullock, Dom Carter, Nicola Clarke, Sarah Dobbs, Rhian Drinkwater, Robbie Dunlop, Richard Edwards, Dave Golder, Jasmine Gould-Wilson, Stephen Jewell, Leila Latif, Clarisse Loughrey, Jayne Nelson, Will Salmon, Minyi Seo (design), Jack Shepherd, Neil Smith, David West, James White, Jonathan Wright

Cover images
Doctor Who © BBC/Bad Wolf/Disney, *Star Wars* © Disney/Lucasfilm, *Nosferatu* © Universal/Focus Features, *A Ghost Story For Christmas* © BBC, *The Box Of Delights* © BBC, *Terrifier 3* © Signature/Coven, *The Lord Of The Rings* © Warner Bros, *Critters* © New Line/Warner Bros

Stock elements: SENEZ, Sergey Ryumin, Getty

All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future.

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
marketforce.co.uk
For enquiries, please email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com

International Licensing/Syndication
SFX is available for licensing and syndication. To find out more contact us at licensing@futurenet.com or view our available content at futurecontenthub.com.

Advertising
Media packs available on request
Commercial Director Clare Dove
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Head of Commercial Jon Restall
jon.restall@futurenet.com
Sales Executive Warren Hart
warren.hart@futurenet.com

Subscriptions
New subscribers
magazinesdirect.com
Email help@magazinesdirect.com
Renewal mymagazine.co.uk
Email help@mymagazine.co.uk
Manage your subscription online at www.magazine.co.uk
Consumer Revenues Director
Sharon Todd

Back Issues
Active subscribers have instant access to digital back issues through their iOS or Android device at no extra cost. For help, visit bit.ly/digiback. To purchase single print back issues, visit bit.ly/singleSFX.

Circulation
Newstrade Director Ben Oakden

Production
Head of Production Mark Constance
Production Project Manager
Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager
Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller
Jason Hudson
Senior Production Manager
Maaya Mistry

Management
SVP Consumer Kevin Addley
Managing Director, Games and Ents
Matthew Pierce
Design Director Simon Maynard
Head of Art & Design
Rodney Dive
Director of Group Finance
Oli Foster

SFX (ISSN 1358-5959) Holiday Special 2024, issue 386, is published monthly with an extra issue in December by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK.
Full subscription prices: £71.50 for UK, €158 for Europe, $178 for US, £137 for Rest of World.
Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to SFX, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH. UK

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

All contents © 2024 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

"I'm sure you've landed in plenty of pigs in your time too"

ipso. For press freedom with responsibility

Widely Recycled

FUTURE
Connectors. Creators. Experience Makers.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief Executive Officer **Jon Steinberg**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial Officer **Sharjeel Suleman**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SFX 387 ON SALE 31 DECEMBER

THE BITCH IS BACK!
STAR TREK: SECTION 31
A NEW GENERATION BEGINS

WOLF MAN
UNIVERSAL'S BEAST RETURNS

SEVERANCE
SEASON TWO ARRIVES

GOOSEBUMPS
THE ANTHOLOGY CONTINUES

MAYFAIR WITCHES
THEY'RE NOT ALL PINK AND GREEN

PLUS! LORDS! LIZARDS! LYCANTHROPES!

All contents are subject to change, provided we can turn it round in the 16 working days we have. Happy "holidays"!

Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

NO! WHO ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU? WHAT DO YOU WANT?
WHERE BROODING DARKNESS SPREADS ITS EVIL WINGS THE NIGHT RAVEN STINGS!
...NIGHT-TIME IN THE CITY.
CLUNK!

Night Raven

Nick Setchfield, Editor At Large

Stan Lee reputedly hated *Night Raven*, but for me it was love at first sight. Marvel's most unknowable hero debuted in the UK's *Hulk Comic* in March 1979, part of editor Dez Skinn's bid to shift from American reprints to homegrown talent.

Written by Steve Parkhouse and drawn by David Lloyd, the strip took its cue from a time before superheroes, the age of such vigilantes as the Spider and the Shadow, whose lurid, bullet-studded exploits thundered through the pages of pulp magazines in the 1930s.

Mystery men, they were called, and this guy's the most mysterious of all. Night Raven is a riddle wrapped in a raincoat beneath a fedora. His mask is impenetrable; bird-like but also just a little alien. Crucially, we never see the face behind its pale, bone-like gleam, never learn a secret identity. This is an avenging hero stripped down to barely more than a silhouette, leaving readers just as confounded as the cops and racketeers who cross his path.

Dealing out rough justice on crime-haunted streets, Night Raven burns his brand on the brows of reprobates with a hiss of seared flesh. A pinned note reaffirms his lethal mission statement: "Where brooding darkness spreads its evil wings, the Night Raven stings!"

The *Hulk Comic* stories are tightly plotted three-pagers. Issue two's tale is a masterpiece of economy, entirely wordless save for sound effects: the relentless TAP TAP TAP of a cane as Night Raven poses as a blind man to take down a nest of crooks. Lloyd's evocative black-and-white art, all shadows and suspense, feels like a dry run for *V For Vendetta*.

Alan Moore would take a crack at the character some years later, writing a brilliant sequence of prose stories for *Marvel Super Heroes* and *The Daredevils*. Moving beyond the original '30s backdrop, Moore shatters Night Raven's sanity, making him a tragic, terrifying figure, immortal but tormented. "The brim of the slouch hat hung defeated," Moore notes. "It had lost its war with the rain." You can almost catch a rehearsal of *Watchmen*'s Rorschach here.

Night Raven remains a weird, rarely glimpsed part of the Marvel Universe, lost in the cracks. But I know just where to find him. Night-time in the city. Where brooding darkness spreads its evil wings...

Nick once cornered David Lloyd at a con and came away with a Night Raven.

Fact Attack!

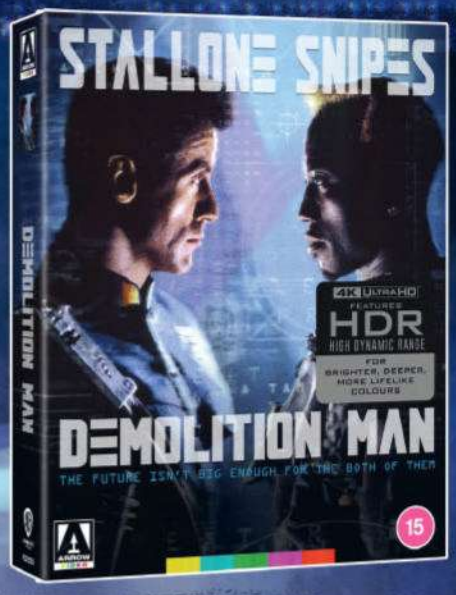
- The note was inspired by Milton's poem "L'Allegro": "Where brooding Darkness spreads his jealous wings/And the night-raven sings."
- The wordless instalment in *Hulk Comic* issue two won Favourite Single Story in the 1980 *Eagle* Awards, voted for by fans.
- Dez Skinn reassured Stan Lee he had a secret plan to bring *Night Raven* into the modern Marvel Universe – but never did.
- Lee disliked David Lloyd's art, leading to John Bolton taking over the strip in *Hulk Comic* for its final run of stories.
- Night Raven made his first appearance in US Marvel continuity in 1995 graphic novel *Fury/Black Widow: Death Duty*.

© MARVEL COMICS

ARROW
PRESENTS

UNCOVER THE TRUE WORLD OF CULT THIS DECEMBER WITH ARROW VIDEO

Discover brand new 4K restorations and special limited editions for the most wonderful time of year. All packed with stunning extras, get ready for the ultimate Yuletide gift this festive season.

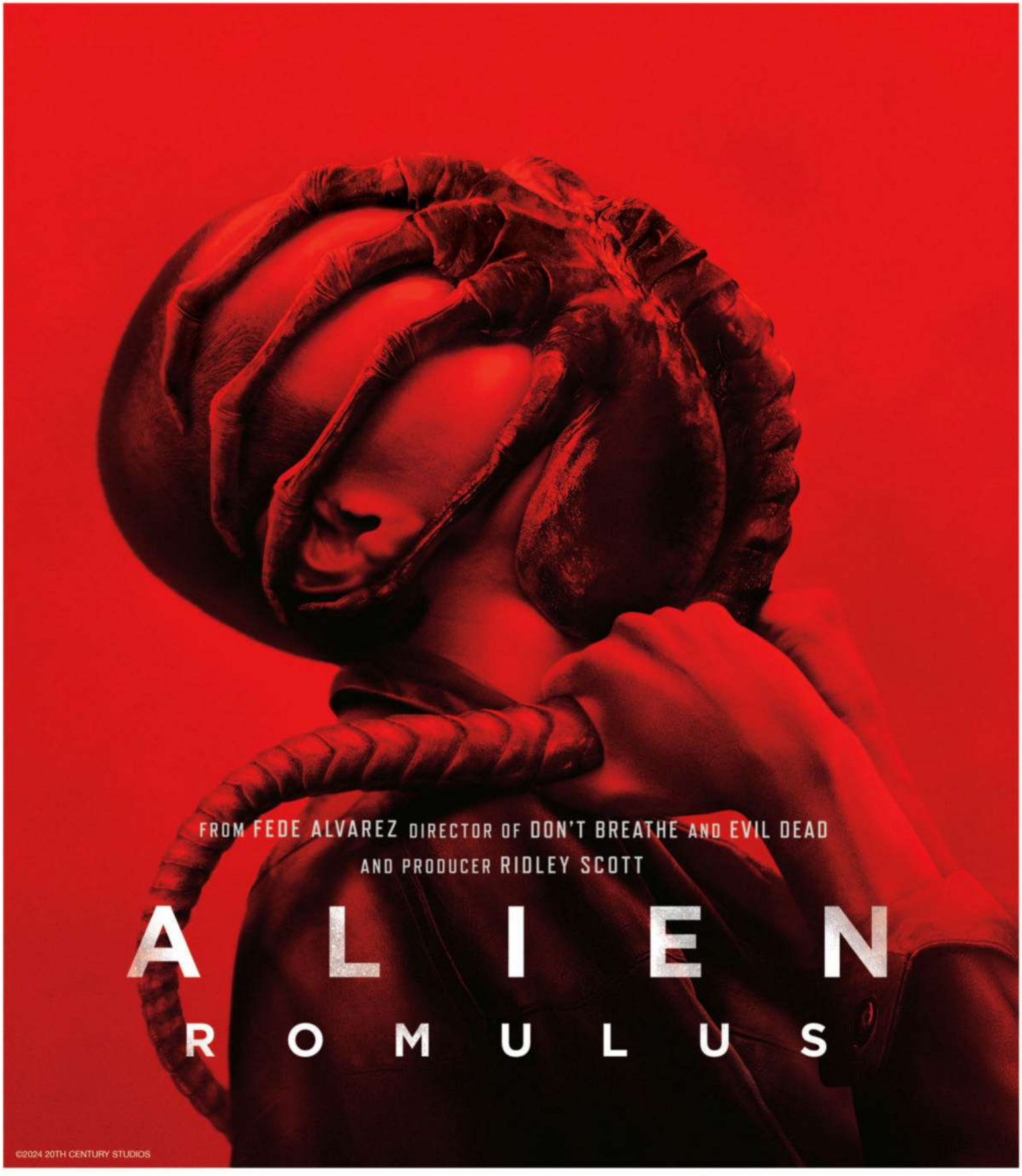


ARROW VIDEO

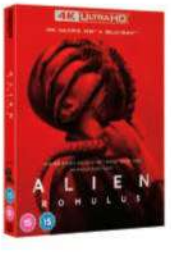
TAKE HOME AN ULTIMATE DOUBLE BILL FOR THE FESTIVITIES

USE CODE DECAV10 FOR 10% OFF ARROWFILMS.COM

Valid: 02/12/24 - 31/01/25. Receive 10% off titles via arrowvideo.com or arrowfilms.com, exclusions may apply. Discount code is not valid in conjunction with any other voucher code or offer, unless otherwise stated. We reserve the right to modify or change this promotion at any time.


FROM FEDE ALVAREZ DIRECTOR OF DON'T BREATHE AND EVIL DEAD
AND PRODUCER RIDLEY SCOTT
ALIEN
ROMULUS
©2024 20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

ALIEN: ROMULUS TERRORIZES ON 4K ULTRA HD™,
BLU-RAY™, AND DVD **OUT NOW**



9001

9000